

# WILD WEST



A MAGAZINE CONTAINING STORIES, SKETCHES Etc. OF WESTERN LIFE.

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## YOUNG WILD WEST AND THE CATTLE BRANDERS; OR, CROOKED WORK ON THE BIG G. RANCH.

*By AN OLD SCOUT.*



"I reckon we'll have to find out something about this, Charlie," said Wild, as he made a leap for the end of the cabin. Finding a curtain there, he quickly pulled it apart and a man was disclosed. Spat! Wild's fist shot out and caught him on the nose.



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## Young Wild West and the Cattle Branders

—OR—

### Crooked Work on the Big G Ranch

By AN OLD SCOUT.

#### CHAPTER I.

##### THE FIRE ON THE PRAIRIE.

"I smell smoke, Wild."

The speaker was Cheyenne Charlie, the well-known Government scout and Indian fighter, and the person he addressed was Young Wild West, the dashing Prince of the Saddle and Champion Deadshot of the West.

It was near sunset on a day in December, a few years ago, when the ranches of northwestern Texas were far more few than at present. The day had been a remarkably warm one, for the season of the year, and the dashing young hero of the Wild West, so well known to our readers and his friends, had camped in a narrow belt of timber land. While the supper was being prepared by the Chinese cook Young Wild West and Cheyenne Charlie decided to walk over to the edge of the timber, which was not more than a couple of hundred yards from the site they had selected as a camping place, and take a look around it.

It was just as they were nearing the edge of the woods when the scout made the remark quoted above.

"You're right, Charlie," Wild answered, as he sniffed the air. "I hope the prairie has not caught fire, for the grass is as dry as powder. There hasn't been any rain in over a week."

The next minute they stepped out of the woods, and then it was that they saw what caused the smoke.

As our hero had feared, the prairie was on fire.

Over a mile to the west a long line of flame was spreading, and it was the smoke from this that the two had smelled, the wind being almost directly that way.

One glance told them that the flames had not been in operation more than ten minutes at the most.

Ahead of the line of flame there was a dense smoke which hugged the ground just then on account of some freak of the wind.

Suddenly this lifted, as though by magic, and then our two friends gave a simultaneous start of surprise.

A bunch of cattle was running ahead of the fire!

"Charlie," said Wild, as he brushed back his long, chestnut hair and shook his head decisively, "it looks to me as though there is crooked work going on. Some one set the grass on fire for the purpose of stampeding those cattle. I'll bet on it!"

"That's jest about ther size of it, Wild," the scout retorted. "I—hello! There's a rider ahead of ther cattle. Looks like a boy from here!"

"Right you are again, Charlie. "And look behind the fire. There! Look now! What do you see?"

"Four or five horsemen," was the quick reply.

"That's right. Now what are they doing there, and the other fellow ahead of the fire, with the cattle? If there isn't crooked work in this, then my name is not Young Wild West. I seldom make a mistake when I form an opinion, Charlie."

"I know yer don't, Wild; an' what you think I always think. I can't help it, 'cause you strike it jest right every time. But, say! That feller ridin' along with them cattle is in a mighty bad way. Ther fire is swingin' around on both ends, an' if he don't look out he's goin' ter git catched."

"That's right, Charlie. I reckon we had better get our horses and see if we can't help him. Hurry up!"

The two turned and ran to the camp in a hurry.

Jim Dart, the other partner of Young Wild West, and the three girls who traveled with them on their trips in search of fortune and adventure, were surprised to see them come back in that hurried manner.



Jim, who was a boy about the same age as our hero, knew that something was decidedly wrong right away.

"What's up, Wild?" he asked.

"The prairie is on fire, and a horseman and about a hundred cattle are running before the flames. The wind is right this way, too."

That was quite enough for Dart.

He ran to get his horse ready, and he was not much behind when the dashing young deadshot and the scout mounted and rode through the woods.

The girls were much surprised, and they, too, got ready to assist.

The three were Anna, the wife of Cheyenne Charlie; Arietta Murdock, the golden-haired sweetheart of Young Wild West, and Eloise Gardner, Jim Dart's sweetheart.

The latter two were girls in their teens, while the scout's wife was considerably over twenty.

But she was called a girl, just the same.

Arietta was the only one of them who had been born and reared in the West, but they could all ride horses to perfection and shoot remarkably well, either with the rifle or revolver.

"Anna, you and Eloise had better stay right here," said Arietta, with great coolness for one of her sex. "You are not as used to prairie fires as I am."

"Very well, Arietta," the scout's wife replied. "I hope the fire won't reach here."

"Well, you heard what Wild said. The wind is this way."

Eloise, who was the more timid of the three, put on a frightened look at once.

But Arietta reassured her, however, by saying that she thought there was no danger, and then she hastened to get her horse.

But Hop Wah, one of the Chinese servants, had heard what the brave girl said, and he was already saddling her horse, which was a splendid white mare.

The girl put the bridle on, and the next minute she was on the animal's back and following the course her dashing young lover and his two partners had taken.

By this time the smoke was quite thick where it settled among the trees, and the girl realized that there was sure danger in store for them.

If the fire reached the woods and the dry underbrush got to blazing, they would certainly have to shift their quarters.

The spot where they had pitched their camp was an ideal one, since there was a little brook flowing near it and the grass was the best that could be found anywhere in the section.

But they would have to leave it and look elsewhere, if necessity demanded it.

When Arietta reached the edge of the timber strip she saw that the cattle and horseman our hero had spoken of were less than a quarter of a mile away, and that the fire was dangerously close to them.

But just then a kind providence intervened in behalf of those in danger.

The breeze died down to almost nothing and the smoke arose high in the air.

Young Wild West and his partners had galloped forward to do what they could toward saving the horseman

and the cattle, and as the wind died out a cheer went up from them.

Arietta answered it, and, waving her plumed hat, she galloped to meet them.

Our hero had signaled to the rider to swing off to the left, and he had done so.

He barely cleared the advancing cattle, which were now wild with fear and running for their lives, and then he soon reached the trio of Westerners.

As Arietta galloped up she found Wild and his partners talking to a boy of fourteen or thereabouts.

He was very much frightened, and he was trying to tell them how a gang of cattle thieves had set the dry grass on fire.

Meanwhile the cattle were pursuing a course that would clear the camp in the woods, and by a very good margin at that.

Consequently there was no fear in that direction.

Young Wild West cast a sweeping glance along the line of fire, and he gave a satisfied nod.

"It won't reach the woods," he said. "See! The wind is coming up from the south. The flames won't cross that ridge over there, for there is nothing that will burn there. I reckon the galoots didn't succeed in doing all they intended to."

"The cattle belong to my uncle, who owns the Big G Ranch," spoke up the boy. "They have been driven away from the main herd and the villains meant to get them far enough away so they can rebrand them and call them their own. I have been out two days with the cowboys looking for them, and I was the one that found them. They call me the Boy Tenderfoot, but I guess I showed them something to-day. The cowboys are a long distance from here, but when I struck the trail of the cattle I didn't care. I made up my mind to find them, and I did, too. The villainous gang that drove them away started the fire to burn me up, I guess. They certainly saw me riding up."

Our friends saw that the boy was a very earnest and truthful fellow, for he told his story without a hitch.

"You did remarkably well," said Wild. "What is your name?"

"Billy Dover, and I'm all the way from New York."

"Is that so? Well, you are a sort of boy tenderfoot, then?"

"That's right, Young Wild West."

"Ah! You seem to know me, Billy?"

"Who wouldn't, after he had heard and read so much about you?" and the boy smiled, for he was now pretty cool.

"Well, I don't know so much about that. I haven't done so much that people should talk a great lot about me. Just because I have the time on my hands and have a notion of spending it hunting around for excitement, don't say that I am anything great. I like the sort of life we are leading, and so do my partners and the girls. Why, Billy, we have even got a couple of Chinamen so they like it, too. What do you think of that?"

"Oh, I have heard about your Chinamen, Mr. West—one of them, especially. I read about him in a Denver paper about a year ago. He must be a wonder. I should like to see him."



"Well, come right on with us to the camp, then. The fire is about done for, as the wind has veered around so it can do no further damage. The barren ridge out there will put an end to it. The cattle won't run much further, and if the galoots who set the grass on fire come along to bother with them we'll soon stop them. You can bet on that, Billy Dover!"

"Thank you for saying that," replied the boy, his eyes sparkling with pleasure. "The cowboys will be along looking for me pretty soon, and when they hear that Young Wild West saved me from the cattle in the stampede they'll be mighty glad. You certainly did save my life, I am sure, for I was so excited just then that I would have kept right on for the woods. My pony was tired out, too, and it was all I could do to keep him from stumbling. You waved to me to come this way just in time, I think."

"Well, we thought that was the best way out of it. Come on, Billy!"

The boy mounted his horse with ease, showing how well he had learned that part of ranch life since he had been in Texas.

As they went back to the camp, their horses at a walk, Wild introduced him to Arietta and his partners.

He had forgotten to do this before, as Bill Dover was so much of a talker that he did not hardly give him a chance to think about it.

The little fellow was about the average size for his age and rather delicate in appearance.

But there was no doubt that the pure, fresh air of the prairie was benefiting his health, and if he remained there long enough he would grow up a robust, hearty man.

Anna and Eloise were delighted when they found that all danger from the fire was past.

They were more than pleased to meet the boy who had been saved from being trampled to death by the maddened cattle, too, and they welcomed him warmly.

Wing, the cook, had kept right on with his preparations for the evening meal, and it was now ready.

Billy Dover was very hungry, and he accepted the invitation to join them at supper without hesitation.

He talked as he ate and gave them a brief account of his life in New York before he came West to live with his uncle on the Big G Ranch.

The meal was just about over when four cowboys came galloping through the woods.

## CHAPTER II.

### WHAT HAPPENED TO THE FOREMAN OF THE BIG G RANCH.

"Here the boys come!" cried Billy Dover. "I knew they would be along soon!"

"Where have you been, Kid?" queried a strapping fellow, who was conspicuous in a flaming red shirt, as he reined in his mustang within a few paces of those in the camp.

"I found the cattle, Bill," answered the boy; "I had a mighty hot time of it after I found them, too."

"Was it you what sot ther grass afire?"

The man asked the question half-angrily.

"No, Bill; it was the cattle thieves who did that. I come near getting run down by the cattle, and I guess I would have been if it had not been for Young Wild West."

"Young Wild West, you say?" and the cowboy turned his gaze upon our hero and looked at him searchingly.

"That happens to be me," Wild spoke up.

He did not like the looks of the big cowboy a bit, and his manner was anything but pleasant.

"So you're Young Wild West, the Champion Deadshot, eh?"

Bill dismounted as he said this, and then his three companions followed suit.

It was beginning to grow dark now, and the light from the campfire shone full upon the newcomers, fetching them out in bold relief.

Wild took occasion to look them over quickly, and his partners and the girls did likewise.

They all appeared to be all right except the one called Bill.

There was something about him that betokened craftiness and deceit.

"You are sure it wasn't you who sot ther grass afire?" the big cowboy said, looking at the boy, as though he did not believe what he said.

He paid no further attention to Young Wild West just then.

"Of course, it wasn't him, Bill. Yer oughter know that he wouldn't do anything like that," spoke up one of the three cowboys.

"Sartin not," another said, quickly. "Ther boy is all right. He's all wool an' a yard wide, he is!"

Billy looked much pleased at this.

But it was plain that the leader of the cowboys did not think the same as the others did.

He frowned and then observed:

"Well, yer hadn't oughter left us like yer did. I reckon we won't fetch yer with us on ther range ag'in."

"Why, wasn't it a good thing I left you, Bill?" asked the boy tenderfoot. "I found the cattle, didn't I?"

"Well, never mind if yer did. We'd have found 'em soon enough, most likely. Cattle thieves, eh? Who told yer they was cattle thieves, anyhow?"

"We all know that there's some of 'em around, Bill," the man who had spoken in the boy's favor before said. "What's ther use of bein' mad about it? Bill Dover is all right."

"When I ax fur your opinion, Sam Pratt, yer kin give it—not before. I reckon I'm ther foreman of ther Big G Ranch, an' what I says has got ter go, when Godfrey Graham ain't around."

"See here, Bill!" exclaimed the cowboy, his eyes flashing. "I've took about all I'm goin' ter from you. You're ther foreman, I know; but you've been actin' mighty funny of late. You've bulldozed the whole lot of us, an' you've rubbed it in putty hard, too. I jest ain't goin' ter take no more of it, foreman or no foreman!"

Bill Myers, the foreman of the Big G Ranch, uttered an oath.

"Stop that!" exclaimed Young Wild West, suddenly, as he stepped in front of him. "There's ladies here, and you ought to have more politeness. Just shut up, now!"



If you want to have trouble with your men, go somewhere else and have it out!"

"I'd like ter see anything like you make me go somewhere else!" the cowboy retorted, hotly.

"You would, eh? Well, I'll just show you how easy it can be done, then. To tell you the truth, I don't like the looks of you. I think you are crooked. You're no good, in fact! Now, then, you've got just ten seconds to get out of this camp. If you don't go in that time I'll pick you up and throw you in the brook over there! You hear what I say, you big, contrary galoot!"

All four of the cowboys opened wide their eyes.

"Gracious!" exclaimed Billy Dover. "Bill, you'd better look out! Young Wild West has got his dander up."

"Shet up, you little brat!" was the retort.

Then, without the least warning, the foreman aimed a blow at our hero.

Wild was expecting such a move and dodged the blow.

Then, as quick as a flash, he lowered his head and rushed at the bulky form of the rascally fellow.

His right arm encircled his waist and his left hand caught him by the calf of the leg.

Then up he went, the small of his back resting upon our hero's shoulders.

Almost before Bill realized that he had been seized Wild was rushing for the brook.

Splash!

The cowboy landed on his head and shoulders in the shallow stream, the water flying in every direction.

His companions looked amazed at first; then they grinned.

Bill got out of the brook in a hurry.

He grabbed for his big six-shooter, but it had dropped from the holster when he went up in the air.

His hunting knife was the next thing he reached for, and, finding it there, he pulled it out and made a rush for Young Wild West.

The young deadshot was right there to meet him.

Spat!

A blow straight from the shoulder caught the irate Bill between the eyes and he measured his length on the ground.

"Hurrah!" cried the boy tenderfoot, who was unable to keep from giving vent to his delight. "That's the way Young Wild West does it, boys!"

"It serves Bill right," declared Sam Pratt. "He was lookin' fur fight, an' now he's got it."

But Bill was "game," as the cowboys called it, and he soon got up and tried to get hold of the agile young deadshot.

But the training Young Wild West had received, coupled with his wonderful coolness and judgment, made it an impossibility for the cowboy to do anything.

His hands grabbed the empty air, and that was all.

But, as he recovered from his mad rush and came again for our hero, a fist caught him squarely on the point of his jaw, and, with a groan, he fell.

This time Bill Myers lay perfectly still.

"I reckon that will be about all," said Wild, as he turned to the three cowboys.

"That's ther best I ever seen!" declared Sam Pratt. "Boys, give three cheers fur Young Wild West!"

The other two joined in with him, and their voices echoed through the woods.

Bill Myers got up and looked around him in a vague sort of way.

It must have come to him pretty quickly, and, as he had had quite enough of it, he started for his horse.

"Where are yer goin', Bill?" one of the cowboys asked him.

"None of your business!" came the reply.

Then he clambered upon the back of his horse and, without another word, rode off into the gathering darkness.

"Let him go!" exclaimed Sam Pratt. "Bill has acted mighty queer of late. There's something wrong with him, an' I know it. He's bound ter stick up fur ther cattle thieves, as he says they ain't cattle thieves. Sorter looks ter me as though he might be in with 'em. I can't help thinkin' that way, boys."

He turned to his two companions as he spoke the last words.

They both nodded, showing that they agreed with him.

It did not take long for the three to get on very friendly terms with Young Wild West and his friends.

They made no move to follow the foreman, and finally Sam Pratt turned to our hero and said:

"We're a good twenty miles from ther wagon an' ther rest of ther boys, an' it's all of forty miles to ther ranch. How about us stoppin' here with you folks till mornin'?"

"You are perfectly welcome," was the ready reply. "I reckon I am able to size folks up a little, if I am only a boy. I've come across all kinds of men in my day, and I can do pretty well at picking the good from the bad. I take it that you three fellows are all right. The galoot that just went away is all wrong; that is the difference."

"You've got that just right, Young Wild West," spoke up Billy Dover. "I never liked Bill Myers from the first I saw of him; but he was the foreman, so I tried to treat him as such. It did me a lot of good to see you thrash him. My! but you must be awful strong! And you are as quick as a flash, too! If I could be like you when I get as big as you are, I would not want anything else in the world. I could make my fortune, I know."

"Well," said Wild, with a laugh, "you just take things cool and keep yourself in trim, and you'll come out all right. I'll help you all I can while I'm with you."

The boy tenderfoot was delighted.

"Hurrah!" he exclaimed. "Sam, did you hear that?"

"I reckon I did," replied the cowboy, who had been busy taking the saddle from his mustang and making ready to stop over night. "Young Wild West is ther boss off all ther deadshots, an' yer kin bet that he kin show you things yer never thought of in ther line of shootin' an' fightin'."

The cowboys admitted that they had eaten no supper, so Wing was instructed to get something ready for them.

### CHAPTER III.

#### BILL MYERS AND THE CATTLE BRANDERS.

We will follow Bill Myers, for he is to play an important part in this story.



The villain—for he certainly was a villain—headed straight for the burned part of the prairie as soon as he got out of the woods.

He was still a bit dizzy from the blows he had received from Young Wild West, and it can well be believed that he was very bitter in his hate for the dashing young dead-shot.

"I'll fix him!" he exclaimed, under his breath. "Jest wait! We'll see if that young galoot is goin' ter come here ter interfere with what we're doin'. That boy tenderfoot is ther cause of it all, too. If it hadn't been fur him Young Wild West an' his pards wouldn't have bothered, it ain't likely. They wouldn't have knowed how ther grass got afire, an' as long as it didn't interfere with them they wouldn't have tried ter find out. Now it's different. They've got wind of what's goin' on, 'cause Bill Dover kept talkin' about ther cattle thieves, an' ther chances is that Young Wild West will go straight to ther ranch an' git ther ideas of ther boss 'way up. But I'll fix ther young galoot! He made an awful show of me, an' I'll never call it square until he takes a lead pill in ther place where it'll do him ther most good. If it's found out that there's crooked work goin' on I won't stand much of a chance. I reckon I'll git to ther boys an' then we'll talk ther matter over."

The fire had gone out by this time, though in some places the roots of the grass were still smoking.

But Bill Myers paid no attention to this.

He rode on, just as though he knew exactly where he was heading for.

This proved to be the case, for about five miles from the spot where the grass had been set afire he came to a clump of trees that was possibly an acre in extent.

The light of a campfire showed through the undergrowth, and as the rascally foreman rode up he slackened speed and gave a whistle.

This was answered almost instantly, and then Bill called out:

"It's all right, boys; it's me—Bill Myers!"

"Oh! We thought it might have been one of them galoots what interfered an' got ther boys out of the scrape we had him in. Come on, Bill. What's up, anyhow?"

"A whole lot is up, I reckon," replied the cowboy foreman, as he walked his horse in among the trees and followed the man he had been talking to over to the campfire.

There were four others there, and they were all standing, with looks of expectancy on their faces.

As Bill's forehead had begun to swell before this, and his face looked a bit one-sided from the blow he had received on the jaw, he at once became an object of curiosity.

"What's ther matter with your face, Bill?"

The question was asked by two or three of them, as if in one voice.

"I got a lickin', boys," was the reply, while an ugly scowl showed on his battered visage. "Do I look bad?"

"Yer look as though you'd been kicked by a mustang, all right," one of them answered.

"Well, I wasn't. It was a boy what give ther lickin'."

"Not ther boy tenderfoot, what come along ter inter-

fere with our game?" cried the man who had met him at the edge of the clump of trees.

"Oh, no; not him, boys. It was Young Wild West what done it. Have yer ever heard of him?"

The men shook their heads.

It just happened that they had not, for they had come over from Arkansas but six months previous, and none of them could read well enough to glean anything from the papers.

"A boy, you say?" one of them queried.

"Yes; but not a small boy, like Billy," replied the foreman. "I s'pose he ain't more'n eighteen, though. But he's full-grown, an' he's as strong as a lion an' as quick as chain lightnin'. I've heard of him afore, an' I ought ter have knowed enough ter let him alone. But I didn't, 'cause I was mad, an' that was how I got my medicine. He give it ter me good an' hard, boys. But don't think I won't git square! I ain't ther one as ever fur-gives a person fur doin' me a wrong."

"I reckon yer ain't, Bill."

The villain then related the whole circumstance, and when he had done his hearers showed signs of uneasiness.

"It'll be a great note if our game gits sp'iled," said one. "Here we are, with a hundred cattle right in our grasp. We've got ther brandin' irons right here that will change ther big G, Graham's brand, inter a big Q. That was a great scheme of yours, Bill, ter think of how easy it would be ter make a Q out of a G."

"Simple enough, though, ain't it?" and Bill smiled a little, it being the first time he had done so since he came in contact with Young Wild West.

"But we ain't never found out what ther Q meant," spoke up one of the cattle branders.

"Q stands fur queer, fur one thing," the foreman answered. "Maybe Godfrey Graham might think it mighty queer why he's losin' so many of his cattle. Ha, ha, ha!"

This time the foreman laughed heartily, and without any effort, too.

"Queer, eh? Well, it is sorter queer," remarked the man who had said that it was a great scheme on the part of the rascally foreman to think of such a thing.

Bill now asked them if they had anything to eat, and receiving a reply in the affirmative, he attended to his horse and then made ready to stop with them till morning.

It was not much of a meal that he got, but it served to answer the purpose, and when he was done he lighted his pipe and smoked along with the villainous cattle branders.

"There's jest this much about it," he said. "I've got ter git to ther ranch as soon as I kin to-morrer mornin' an' be ther first ter let ther boss know that anything has happened. I s'pose I'll have ter sorter stick up fur ther kid, too, 'cause Graham likes him a whole lot. But I'll try an' make it appear that ther grass was fired by some greasers from ther 3 X Ranch. I'll say that I found this out after I quit ther camp of Young Wild West. But in ther meantime yer want ter go right ahead with them cattle."

"All right. I reckon if we happen ter git trailed ter our log house we'll soon scare any one away what comes



there. It won't make no difference who it is, either! I never yet seen any one what wasn't a little squeamish when ghosts was around."

"What have yer been doin', Aleck?" asked Bill, showing much interest.

"Well, if you kin scheme ter steal cattle an' make money, Aleck kin sartin scheme ter scare folks," spoke up one of the five cattle branders, looking at the man he referred to with no little pride. "He's a mighty handy galoot with a paint brush, an' at makin' a shanty appear haunted he ain't got no equal. You jest come up to-morrer night, an' we'll show yer somethin' that will make your hair stand up."

"By thunder! I guess I'll have ter come, if that's ther case," Bill answered.

"I've got things there that will make yer flesh creep ter look at 'em," Aleck went on to say. "An' ther noises you'll hear will make you wish that yer was somewhere else than in our log cabin, too."

"All right. I'll be over. But jest don't fail ter git as many of them cattle away afore to-morrer night as yer can, will yer? I need a couple of hundred dollars bad about now."

"Oh, business afore pleasure, every time!"

"I jest wish we could git this young galoot yer call Young Wild West up to our shanty," observed one of the others, after a pause. "It would sartinly give him a chance ter show what he's made of."

"Maybe we kin do that all right," Bill answered. "But if we do he'll git somethin' more than a scare, I reckon. I want revenge fur ther beatin' he giv' me, an' nothin' short of his scalp will satisfy me."

"Yer don't mean ter kill him, do yer, Bill?" queried another.

"Why not?" was the reply. "Won't he git us all hung if he's allowed ter have ther chance? Ain't that his game? Don't he mix up in every piece of crooked business he hears tell of an' bust up gangs like ours? Well, I should reckon so! Young Wild West ain't a safe galoot ter have runnin' around loose, boy as he is."

The subject was kept up for over an hour, and by that time the five cattle branders were of the opinion that Young Wild West and his partners were very dangerous customers, indeed.

They were also interested in the girls Bill said he had seen at the camp.

"I reckon we'll have ter have a look at 'em," said Aleck.

"Well, ther chances is that they'll all be at our ranch to-morrer. So yer kin come over an' make out you're lookin' fur stray cattle," Bill answered.

The six villains soon turned in.

They did not deem it necessary to keep a watch, and, wrapped in their blankets, they slept till daylight.

Then, after eating what there was to be had, they separated, Bill Myers striking out for the ranch and the five cattle branders going out to see what they could do with the cattle they had driven so far from the range.

The rascally foreman did not reach the ranch until about two in the afternoon, and when he got there he was not surprised to find that Young Wild West and his friends were there.

But he was disappointed, as well as surprised, for he

had hoped to be the first to tell Godfrey Graham about the prairie fire and the stampede of the cattle.

Little Billy Dover had come over with our friends, leaving the three cowboys to look up the cattle that had stampeded.

When Bill reached the house and went to make his report his hopes went away up, for the ranchman was not there.

## CHAPTER IV.

### WILD "BUSTS" THE BUCKSKIN BRONCHO.

It is quite likely that the boy tenderfoot would have remained with the cowboys to help hunt up the cattle he had found the evening before if it had not been that Young Wild West and his friends decided to go to the ranch the first thing in the morning.

That changed the ideas of the boy, and he was anxious to receive some lessons in shooting and horsemanship from the dashing young hero of the Wild West.

It was a long ride to the ranch, but they got there in due time, having made an early start.

But they had not been there any longer than to have time to be introduced to Billy's aunt when Bill Myers was seen riding over the prairie toward the house.

The boy had been telling the ranchman's wife about what had happened and how the cowboy foreman had left him and the men at the camp of Young Wild West, and when the woman saw Myers coming she exclaimed:

"Why, here he comes now! I will wait and hear what he has to say before I pass judgment on him. He might have been in a bad humor last night, and it is most likely he is sorry for it to-day."

"That's right, Auntie," answered the boy tenderfoot, who was bound to let her have her own way about it.

But the truth was that Billy had seen just about enough to convince him that the foreman was a regular villain, and he wanted to tell his uncle so as soon as he got the chance.

But the ranchman had gone out to the south range to look after things, and he would not be back before night.

When Bill rode up and inquired for the boss it was Mrs. Graham who informed him that he would not be back until night.

"All right," said the foreman. "I don't s'pose there is any use in makin' a report ter you, Missus Graham; but I will say that I have found out that ther galoots what sot ther grass on fire an' give ther kid a hard tussle was some greasers from ther 3 X-Ranch. I run afoul of 'em last night after I left ther kid an' ther boys with Young Wild West. We had a little time of it, an' I stung one of ther greasers putty hard. There ain't no use in me sayin' about what happened between me an' Young Wild West. I s'pose ther kid has told yer all about that. But I will say that I was putty mad last night or I wouldn't have talked an' done as I did. What I got serves me right, Missus Graham."

So saying, the hypocritical foreman turned and went over to the cowboys' headquarters, turning his horse loose to graze as he did so.



Young Wild West said not a word, but he had been listening to all Myers said.

"He's got a pair of black eyes, all right, Wild," remarked Cheyenne Charlie, with a grin. "I reckon he sorter was ashamed of himself when he come an' told what he had ter say. But it wasn't no greasers what set ther prairie afire, yer kin bet on that! I seen ther galoots an' so did you. You know they wasn't greasers."

"I know that for a fact, Charlie," was the reply. "Well, we won't contradict what he said; we'll let him have it his own way. As long as he lets me be I am satisfied."

"Yes, but he won't let yer be, Wild! That galoot is what yer calls a vindictive one, an' I'm sartin of it."

"Well, I think the same way. But never mind. This thing will come out all right, I reckon."

Our friends had not eaten anything since early that morning, and when the ranchman's wife learned this she insisted on putting out the best she had in the house for them.

Young Wild West was willing to pay for what they had, but he knew that it was not the custom for the ranchmen to receive anything for meals they gave to travelers.

Mrs. Graham took pains to let them know this before they sat down, too.

What she put out for them to eat was done with a hearty good will.

Billy Dover was a great favorite of his aunt, and when he told her what a great hero Young Wild West was, and how he had promised to teach him something about handling a gun and riding bronchos, she smiled and encouraged him to go ahead and learn all he could.

As the woman had been born and reared in Texas, she thought it very essential that every boy should know how to do those things.

After dinner Billy got at our hero right away, and the result was that he told him to come out and he would show him a few things in the way of handling a lariat.

Billy was delighted, as may be imagined, and in a few minutes they were over at the corral, where some bucking bronchos were kept.

Charlie went along with them, the rest staying at the house.

The scout knew he would be needed to help Wild out in giving the lessons he proposed to give, since horses would have to be caught and held while the thing went on.

It so happened that when they got to the corral they found Bill Myers there.

He nodded to Wild and Charlie in a civil way, and then, looking at the boy tenderfoot, said:

"What are yer up ter now, Billy?"

"Young Wild West is going to show me how to bust a bucking broncho," was the reply. "He can do it, if any one can, I guess, Bill."

"Maybe he kin; I won't say anything about that. But that buckskin over there in ther corner can't be handled by no man, let alone a boy."

He pointed out the steed, which was really a bad-looking one.

"Have you tried him, Bill?" the boy asked.

"Yes, four or five of us had a try at him ther day afore yisterday. There wasn't one of us what could keep on his

back more'n two minutes, either. Ther boys allowed that I done ther best, though I won't say that I did. I don't believe in braggin' much, anyhow."

Wild took all this in for what it meant.

He knew that the foreman would like very much to see him tackle the buckskin, and he decided to satisfy his desire.

"Well, Billy," he said, turning to the little fellow from the East, "I reckon you had better not tackle that broncho, then. I think if I tame him a little first you can do it, though. I suppose you have been on the back of a buckner before this?"

"Oh, yes; I've been on three or four of them. But they were not real bad ones, and I only got thrown off a couple of times."

"Well, you can ride out with Charlie and catch the buckskin. Then I'll tame him so you can tackle him."

"All right!" exclaimed Billy, clapping his hands with delight. "I know it will be all right if you say so."

"I do say so. Go ahead."

The evil eyes of Bill Myers glinted with satisfaction.

The villain really thought that there was not a man, much less a boy, who could do anything with the ugly buckskin broncho, and he anticipated an easy defeat for the boy whose friends took so much delight in calling him the Prince of the Saddle.

Our hero had mounted his splendid sorrel stallion Spitfire and Charlie and Billy each rode their own horses when they came to the corral.

Wild remained seated on the back of his horse while the two rode into the corral to catch the buckskin.

Bill Myers did not get very close to the dashing Prince of the Saddle.

In fact, he did not want to, for he feared that his feelings might cause him to say something that would cause a row, and he did not want to be very near the boy if anything like that happened.

Cheyenne Charlie could have caught the buckskin right away, but he knew that Wild wanted to give the boy tenderfoot a chance to learn all he could, so he did not try.

Billy tried twice to lasso the animal as the scout forced him past him, but he failed both times, and then he called upon Charlie to do it.

"You try ag'in, an' then if yer don't do it I'll soon git him fur yer," was the reply.

The next time the boy succeeded.

Charlie helped him subdue the broncho, and then Wild rode up to help them get the saddle and bridle on him.

This was accomplished with no little difficulty, for the buckskin was certainly a vicious beast.

Myers had dismounted and was leaning over the wire fence about two hundred feet away.

Wild cast an occasional glance at him, and he could tell that the villainous foreman was very much interested.

"I'll soon make him surprised, unless I find that I have struck the worst broncho I ever tried to ride," our hero thought. "He thinks that no one can ride this beast because he failed to do it himself. His opinion is probably that what he can't do no one else can. Well, we'll soon find out about it."

Charlie had put his coat over the broncho's head, so it could not see, and the animal was quite still now.



When Wild was ready he took the broncho by the bridle and told the scout to remove the coat from his head.

Up went the animal, hunching his back and bringing his four feet together.

But when he went up Young Wild West went with him, and when his feet struck the ground the boy was in the saddle.

Then ensued a scene that made little Billy Dover hold his breath.

He had seen that same buckskin make all who tackled him quickly succumb, and to see Young Wild West sitting on his back, fitting himself to every motion the beast made, and with such regularity and ease, too, was thrilling enough to make him wild with joy.

The broncho bucked, reared, kicked, and then got down and rolled.

But Wild was off his back when the occasion demanded it and on again when the buckskin got up.

For five minutes the fight for supremacy lasted, and then, partly giving in to the dashing young Prince of the Saddle, the broncho set out for a gallop around the corral.

Riding with the ease and grace of a Centaur, Wild kept the animal going, and in this way he finally subdued him.

Steaming and breathing hard, the buckskin was brought to a halt before Charlie and Billy.

## CHAPTER V.

### CHARLIE HEARS AN INTERESTING CONVERSATION.

"What do you think of that, Bill?" called out the boy tenderfoot, exultantly, as he turned and waved his hand to the foreman of the cowboys.

"Oh, that was putty good, I reckon," was the reply. "I s'pose ther nag has got tamed from what happened ter him ther day afore yisterday. No one could have rid him then, an' I know it!"

"But I think he acted just as bad to-day, if not worse. It was a different rider he had to-day, Bill. You'll have to give in to it. You can't come up to Young Wild West at riding a bucking broncho."

"You've got a good deal more to say around here than you oughter have, Kid," was the retort.

Then the foreman mounted his horse and rode away.

Charlie watched him and saw that he was heading to the west, but, thinking that he was going out to look after the cattle, he said nothing about it.

There was too much on hand just then, anyhow, for Billy Dover was eager to mount the broncho.

"You've got to keep your eyes open, and be alive to his every motion, too," said our hero, as he dismounted and held the trembling steed by the bit. "Give him a boost to the saddle, Charlie."

"Right yer are, Wild."

The next minute the boy was astride the broncho, and the scout was shortening the stirrups for him.

"Let him go!" cried Billy.

"Be careful," cautioned Wild, as he obeyed, and then

rapidly ran to his own horse, so he might be able to get to him quickly, in case the little fellow met with an accident.

Away went the buckskin, forgetting to buck, it seemed, for the time being.

Billy had become quite accustomed to the saddle since he had been on his uncle's ranch, and he found it nothing different from the regular horse he had been given to ride.

But that was only at first.

The broncho must have finally understood that he had a different person on his back from the one who had conquered him, and after a couple of turns around the corral had been made he began to "cut up."

But Billy was confident, and he proved to be a very apt pupil of Young Wild West.

So well did he pattern after the dashing young dead-shot that the animal failed to throw him by bucking, and it was not until he got down and rolled that the boy was forced to leave the saddle.

But he got on his back the moment he started to get up, and then away he went again.

After about ten minutes of hard work Billy was satisfied to give it up for the day.

But he was satisfied that he was making giant strides toward breaking himself in as a broncho buster, and he was so elated that he gave three cheers for Young Wild West.

After taking a few lessons with the lasso, they all went back to the ranch, and, putting up their horses, returned to the house.

It was now well toward the close of the afternoon, and Mrs. Graham had the supper under way.

The girls had insisted on helping her with the household work, and they were all getting along nicely.

"Where are the two Chinamen, Et?" asked Wild, as he looked into the kitchen.

"I haven't seen them since right after you went out, Wild," was the reply. "Most likely Wing is dozing somewhere, but I wouldn't be surprised if Hop is in some kind of mischief."

"Well, if he has been able to find any one to play cards with him that is what he is up to, probably."

"I don't know of anybody who could play with him, just now, anyhow," spoke up Mrs. Graham. "I hardly think the men have got in yet, unless it might be Bill Myers, the foreman."

"I reckon I'll take a walk around an' look for him," remarked the scout.

He went outside by way of the kitchen and, looking around, he was just in time to see Bill Myers riding up to the shed-like structure that was used as a quarters for the cowboys.

But when he saw that there was a saddled horse grazing near the building he knew that there was probably a man inside.

Myers went on in, leaving his horse near the other one, without taking any notice of Charlie.

Then the scout moved around and approached the shanty building from the rear.

There happened to be a window there, and when he got to it and peered inside he saw Hop and a villainous-



looking man seated on either side of a barrel, playing poker.

The foreman had just entered, and he was looking at them, an amused look on his face.

"Quite an interesting game, I reckon," the scout heard him remark.

"Velly muchee inteesting, so be," Hop answered, with a smile that was "childlike and bland."

"How long have yer been here, Aleck?" the foreman asked, as he stepped up a little nearer.

"Oh, about half an hour," was the reply. "I rode over from the shanty straight. I seen three galoots out at ther corral foolin' with ther buckin' bronchos, but I didn't know two of 'em, though I guessed that one was Young Wild West by his long, light hair. Ther other was a tall man, with long, black hair an' mustache. Ther third was ther boy what come so near ter gittin' smashed ter powder under ther hoofs of ther cattle last night. I reckon they was learnin' ther boy how ter handle bronchos. Well, I thought I wouldn't bother with them, so I rode on around an' come here. When I got here I found this heathen, an' ther first thing he done was ter take out a pack of cards an' invite me ter try a few hands at draw poker. He's mighty soon at ther game, too, even if he is a Chine."

"Me allee samee Young Wild West's clever Chinee, so be," spoke up Hop, smiling and nodding his head. "It you bet, Misl'er Aleck."

"Well, I'll meet your raise an' call yer; what hev yer got?"

"Me gottee four lill'ee aces, so be."

"Thunder! There it goes ag'in! No matter what I've got, you've always got somethin' a little better. Bill, I dealt ther cards myself that time, and see what I've got."

The foreman looked, and then gave a shrug of his shoulders.

"Four kings ain't nothin' ter four aces, Aleck," he said.

"I know that. But how do yer s'pose ther heathen got ther four aces?"

"You allee samee deal um aces to me, so be," Hop answered, quickly. "You velly nicee dealer."

He raked in the pot, which only amounted to six or seven dollars, and then, looking at the foreman, observed:

"You likee takee lill'ee hand in um game?"

"No," was the reply. "I reckon you're a card sharp in disguise. I ain't no gambler, anyhow. If Aleck is fool enough ter gamble with yer, let him go ahead."

"Well, I reckon I'll quit," said Aleck, rising to his feet. "I ain't got no more money with me, anyhow. He's took about forty dollars from me, which was all I had."

"What made yer come over so soon?" Myers asked, as Hop began to fool with the cards.

"Well, I thought I'd come over an' see if there was any stray cattle over this way. We lost about two dozen head last night."

Aleck shot a glance at the Chinaman as he spoke, and then gave a knowing wink.

Hop did not see it, but the scout did.

Charlie was very much interested.

Meanwhile Hop did a few clever things with the cards and tried his best to get Bill to make a bet with him.

But the foreman was not inclined that way.

"You'd better light out," he said. "We don't want no thievin' card sharps around here. Go an' stay with Young Wild West an' his gang. That's where yer belong. I seen yer last night at ther camp out on ther range. I'll admit that you're a blamed sight smarter than yer look ter be, but yer ain't goin' ter flimflam me, not much! I never bet agin' a man when he's showin' what he kin do with cards. I was bit some time ago in that way, an' I know better now."

"Allee light," answered Hop, and he got up and hurriedly left the shanty, no doubt very glad to think that he was going to get away without being forced to give back his winnings.

"Where's ther boss?" asked Aleck, as Bill sat down on the bench that was vacated by the Chinaman.

"He'll be home putty soon," was the reply.

"Then he don't know what happened?"

"No; but his wife does. Ther boy told ther whole thing, yer know. But it's all right. I told her it was some greasers from ther 3 X Ranch what done ther business. But how about ther cattle? Did ther boys git any of 'em yet?"

"I don't know. I changed my mind about goin' with 'em, an' as soon as I got to our log shanty I got a fresh horse an' struck out fur here. It's only ten miles, yer know, so I wasn't so very long gittin' here after you."

Just then the sounds made by an approaching horse was heard.

Bill got up and went to the door.

"Here comes ther boss now!" he exclaimed. "Now we'll soon fix things with him, so's he won't think there's anything wrong with me or you fellers. I'll tell my story ahead of Young Wild West an' ther kid."

"Good!"

Cheyenne Charlie thought it time to get back to the house and report to Wild, so he promptly left his position at the window and set out.

Hop was already there when the scout arrived, but Charlie paid no attention to him whatever. He called our hero aside and quickly let him know what he had learned.

## CHAPTER VI.

### WILD TO FIND THE CATTLE BRANDERS.

Young Wild West was much pleased when Charlie told him about the conversation he had heard.

"There's crooked work on the Big G Ranch all right," he said. "I reckon we had better stay here long enough to straighten out things, Charlie. We'll see how the boss of the ranch takes us first, though. If he wants us to help him run down the cattle thieves, all right. It is just in our line."

Our hero thought it best to let Bill Myers go ahead with his game for the present.

So he did not go out to meet the ranchman.

A few minutes later Graham came to the house.

Billy Dover was waiting for him, and the moment he appeared the boy tenderfoot exclaimed:



"Oh, Uncle Godfrey! Just see who we have got as guests! Young Wild West, the Champion Deadshot and Prince of the Saddle, is here, and so are his friends. You have often told me about them, and here they are!"

"What!" exclaimed the ranchman, who was a kindly looking man, with a florid complexion. "Is that right? Hello, Young Wild West! You're welcome to ther Big G Ranch. I was thinkin' about you ther other night, 'cause I've got lots of trouble on my hands. I read in ther El Paso paper how you rounded up a lot of cattle thieves down at Buckhorn Ranch, an' I says to myself, 'Now if that boy an' his pards would only come up this way an' take a hand ter help me, how soon ther cattle branders would be fixed!' It seems too good ter be true. But it's you, I know, fur I've had them what's seen yer tell me how yer look."

Wild shook hands with him, much pleased at the way he received them.

"I am Young Wild West, all right, Mr. Graham," he said. "But I don't know why it is that I have made such a reputation. I am sure I never get anything put in the papers to make people talk about me so. I simply try to do the right thing by everybody, and because I have been a bit lucky in breaking up a few bad gangs don't say that I am anything so very great. My partners deserve as much credit as I do. And then there's our girls and our Chinamen, they ought to come in for a share of the praise, if there's any to be given out. They very often do more than their part in such things. The whole thing about it, Mr. Graham, is that we are always going around looking for adventure, and if we happen to run up against a band of cattle thieves we just can't help taking a hand in the game and put them out of business. There are so many lawless men in these parts that it is hard for an honest man to run a successful business at cattle raising. The law can't reach such fellows, it seems, for they are too far away from the courts of justice. That is why we make it our business to go for them every time we get the chance."

"Good! That's ther way ter talk! Now, if you'll only give me a lift an' help me run down ther galoots that's brandin' my cattle with a different brand an' then runnin' 'em off an' sellin' 'em, I'll pay yer well fur yer services. Ther cattle branders has got ther thing down so fine that I can't identify my own cattle when I see 'em. I don't know jest how it's done, but my brand is a big G, an' though I've picked out cattle that I knowed was mine from other marks on 'em, I've found that it wasn't a big G on 'em, after all; but a big Q instead. There's no one what knows who ther man what uses ther Q brand is, an' when a man has bought ther cattle with ther brand on 'em I've jest got ter let 'em go fur lack of proof. Ther brand is ther whole thing in these parts, yer know, Young Wild West."

"Yes, I know," replied our hero. "I have had some little experience in that line. And now, Mr. Graham, since you seem to want us to help you, we'll be only too glad to do so. You see, we are already mixed up in this business, as we happened to be on hand last night to lend a little assistance to your nephew, who came very near going under the hoofs of a small herd of cattle that

was on the stampede before a prairie fire. I suppose your foreman told you all about that, though?"

"Yes, Bill Myers, was tellin' me somethin' about it. He says he found out who ther galoots was what sot ther dry grass on fire, too."

"Oh, I haven't any doubt but that he knows."

Wild said this in a peculiar way, and Graham was not slow to catch on.

He looked a bit puzzled, however, but said nothing.

The ranchman proved himself to be a very fine entertainer.

He was so glad to have our friends as his guests that he could hardly express himself.

And the fact that our hero had promised to aid him in running down the cattle branders made him all the more pleased.

"So it was through Billy that yer got ter come here?" he queried, after he had talked with all hands and assured them over and over again that they were as welcome as the flowers in May at the Big G Ranch.

"Yes, the boy tenderfoot, as he calls himself, was the first to appear on the scene last night," answered our hero. "He has the honor of being the one to find the cattle the villains were driving away, you know."

"Is that so? Why, Bill Myers didn't say anything about that."

"I reckon he didn't tell you everything. He has been too much excited about the greasers, maybe."

"Maybe so. He said it was sure ther greasers from ther 3 X Ranch what stampeded ther cattle."

"Well, he might be a bit mistaken, though."

"Did you folks see ther galoots what sot ther grass on fire?"

"Yes, Charlie and I saw them plainly."

"Well, you ought ter know whether they was greasers or not, then."

"They were not greasers, Mr. Graham."

"Is that right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Then Bill is mistaken."

"Yes, he must be."

"I'll have ter ask him all about it."

"See here, Mr. Graham, I would like to talk with you alone for a minute or two."

"All right," and the ranchman looked expectant.

"I want you to not say anything to your foreman for a while—not until I tell you to, in fact," said our hero, as the two went out in the hall. "There is crooked work on your ranch, and if Myers don't know anything about it, I don't want him to know just yet. Do you understand me?"

"I understand yer perfectly, Young Wild West. But I always did think that Bill was a man what could be trusted. But you kin bet your life that I'll do jest as you say, no matter what I think!"

"All right. If you are going to leave it to me to run down the cattle branders I shall have to ask you to do a little as I say."

"All right. I understand. Not a word will I say ter Bill or ter any of ther rest of ther cowboys."

"That's it. Now I reckon it won't be so very long be-



fore we will know all about it. I'll try and do it inside of forty-eight hours."

"Do yer think yer kin do it as quick as that?"

"Well, I don't know exactly. Sometimes a fellow has better luck than at other times."

"But yer mean ter find out who they are an' then run 'em down?"

"Most assuredly. I never yet attempted anything of the kind that I failed to accomplish. You just leave this to me, Mr. Graham; with the help of my partners I'll find a way."

The supper at the ranch that night was one such as Mrs. Graham had not gotten up for a long time, and she was pleased, as well as proud, when Cheyenne Charlie remarked that it was "ther most substantial feed he had sot down ter fur a year or more."

The scout was a very hearty eater, anyhow, but he generally used his tongue well between swallows, and when he told how he had watched Hop playing draw poker with the visiting cowboys he made them all laugh.

"That heathen must be a mighty clever one," observed the ranchman. "Where did he learn ter play poker, anyhow, Charlie?"

"He says he learned it in Frisco," was the reply. "But there's no believin' what ther yaller galoot says, though. He lies when it would do jest as well ter tell ther truth. He's forever tellin' about a wonderful uncle of his what lives in China, an' Wing, which is his brother, is willin' ter swear that he ain't got no uncle. Now, what difference does it make ter any one whether he's got one or not? We don't care, do we?"

"I am sure we don't, Charlie," his wife spoke up. "But if it does him any good to talk about an imaginary uncle, it certainly does no one any harm."

"No; but ther uncle might feel ashamed if he knowed how Hop was lyin' about him, though."

This caused a hearty laugh at the scout's expense, and it was fully a minute before he realized what it was about.

"Pshaw!" he exclaimed. "How could an uncle feel ashamed of what his nephew said about him, when ther nephew never had no uncle? I mean, how could he——"

But they were laughing harder than ever now, so Charlie gave it up and reached for another apple dumpling.

After the supper was over and the ranchman had brought out pipes and tobacco for those who cared to smoke, Wild called Hop in from the kitchen and told him he might give a little entertainment in magic, if he desired.

Of course, he was willing; and for the next hour he kept the ranchman and his wife in a state of wonderment and mirth.

After the entertainment was over Wild suggested to his partners that they go out for a scout around the range.

"We may run across a clue that will lead us to finding out who the cattle branders are," he said to Graham.

"All right; I hope yer do," was the reply.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE "HAUNTED" LOG SHANTY.

Charlie had told Wild what he had heard the man called Aleck say about the log shanty being only twelve

miles from the ranch and, knowing that it must be the headquarters of the gang that was branding and selling Graham's cattle, it was only to be expected that our hero wanted to pay the place a visit.

He had really found out enough to settle the question as to who the villains were already, but he decided to work the thing down to a close point, and then spring a trap that would catch all those implicated in the crooked work.

Bill Myers was the leading spirit in the whole game, but Wild wanted him to be the very last one to be nipped, if there was to be any last about it.

The scout had even heard Aleck say in which direction the log shanty lay, so it was an easy matter for them to strike out and know pretty well where they were going.

The cattle brander must have left the ranch long before this, though none of them knew for sure.

Anyhow, he had accomplished what he had come to the ranch for, which was simply to make Graham believe that he had lost some cattle.

"This man Aleck must pose as a rancher," remarked Jim, as they rode along over the prairie in the moonlight and were talking about what he had said when Bill Myers came in and interrupted the card game in the shed.

"I suppose he poses as one," Wild retorted. "Well, it may be a little ranch that he and his pards occupy. I never asked Graham anything about it, because I did not want him to know too much just yet. He is a very nice man and would do his best to help us out. But he has his doubts about certain things, and there is no use in letting him know too much, for he would not believe some things until he saw them with his own eyes."

Out on the level prairie they could see quite a long distance.

The moon shone brightly, and if there had been any one within half a mile of them they could easily have seen him.

As they rode along they saw some cattle off to the right, but they were grazing quietly, and there was no sign of any men being near them.

It was not long before they reached a sparse growth of timber that grew on the top of a ridge, and once over this they struck some more land that was level.

"I reckon we've made about nine or ten miles now," said the scout, as he tried to sight something in the line of a building ahead of them.

"Yes, we have come that far all right, Wild answered. "I reckon it won't be very long now before we sight something, boys."

A couple of miles more and then they were pretty sure that they saw a house or some kind of building a little to the left.

They changed their course slightly, and then in a couple of minutes they found they were approaching a long, low building that looked as though it might be built of logs.

A light shone from one end of it, and as the three worked their way around they found that it came from the only window at that part of the building.

But it was so dim that it appeared to be nothing more than a candle light.



Wild and his partners had brought their horses down to a walk now, and slowly they approached the shanty.

As they got closer to it they could see a dilapidated barn in the rear of it, and also a shed.

But the ranch was certainly one that was "run down," so to speak.

There was nothing about it that suggested anything like thrift on the part of those who lived there.

Young Wild West and his partners brought their horses to a halt in a little grove not more than two hundred feet from the log shanty and dismounted.

"Now, boys, we'll just take a look in that window," said our hero. "We want to find out all about this game before we strike in to round up the bunch of cattle branders."

"That right, Wild," answered the scout, while Dart gave a nod of assent.

Leaving their horses concealed in the grove, they made their way cautiously toward the rear of the house.

As they got close to it they could hear the sounds of voices.

Wild stepped forward and took a peep through the window.

Then he found out why the light showed so dimly.

There was a bag hung up to cover the pane, so the light would not show very far.

He found that he could see through a little rent in the bag, however, and it was not long before he was able to discern five men, who were seated about a rough table, playing cards, drinking and smoking.

One of them was Aleck, and, by the way he acted, he seemed to be the leader of the gang.

Charlie and Jim came up and took a look.

"They seem ter be takin' it mighty easy jest now," said the scout in a whisper.

"That's right, Charlie," retorted our hero. "Suppose we go around and knock at the door? We will make out that we are taking a look around for the men who set the prairie afire, but won't let on that we suspect them of being anything but honest people."

"A good idea, Wild."

"You two go in, if they'll let you," said Jim. "I'll stay outside and be ready to give you a hand in case you get into trouble."

This was satisfactory to all three, so Wild and Charlie promptly started for their horses, so they might ride up and make it appear that they had just arrived.

Jim remained right at the side of the shanty.

In a very few minutes the sounds made by the approaching horses rang out.

Jim laughed when he saw how quickly the five villains jumped to their feet.

Out went the light in a jiffy.

"That's off!" muttered Jim. "They must think somebody is after them."

Just then Wild and the scout rode up to the shanty and dismounted.

It had a ricketty, old door, which was partly open.

But Wild knocked loudly upon it, thinking it best to play the part he had planned.

There was no answer, so he knocked again.

Then a sepulchral groan sounded, followed immediately by a flash of bluish light.

"What in thunder does that mean?" exclaimed Cheyenne Charlie, who was startled a little at the unearthly proceedings.

"Ghosts, I reckon," answered Wild. "You ain't afraid of them, are you, Charlie?"

He spoke loudly enough for the men inside to hear him plainly, which was what he intended.

The bluish light continued, so the young deadshot fearlessly pushed open the door and looked inside.

If they had not seen the five men through the window but a short time before they might have considered it a startling scene that met their eyes.

Hanging from a rafter, so its fleshless feet barely touched the floor, was a human skeleton!

Near it was a little iron pot, from which came a flame and considerable smoke.

Wild stepped in, followed by the scout.

Jim came as far as the door, holding a revolver in his hand.

"Hello!" cried the dashing young deadshot. "What are you up to here? We saw a light from your window, and we thought we would stop for a little information. Don't try to frighten us with this kind of business, for we are not the sort who get scared."

Then an awful groan rang out.

Just how it could have been made by a human being the scout could not understand, and he involuntarily took a step backward.

"Mortal man must not come in this house! It is the abode of the dead—the murdered dead!" came in sepulchral tones from somewhere.

Wild thought quickly.

At first he had been going to knock the skeleton down and kick over the blazing pot, but when it occurred to him that it might be better to make out that they were frightened, he stepped back and exclaimed:

"I reckon we'd better get out of here, Charlie. We don't want to have anything to do with dead people. That certainly was not a natural human being who spoke just then."

The scout quickly caught on as to his meaning, and out he went in a hurry.

Wild followed him, acting very much as though he was afraid.

Another unearthly groan sounded, and then the light went out.

Charlie and Jim quickly mounted their horses and galloped away, as though they had not a moment to spare.

But they did not go very far, and then they turned and rode back to the grove.

Jim got there just then, and, with a laugh, he exclaimed:

"What in the world did you do that for, Wild?"

"Oh, just to let them think that we were almost scared out of our wits," was the reply.

"Well, I'll bet the galoots think that is the case. My! I couldn't hardly keep from laughing right out."

"Well, we'll just let them think that they run us out. Maybe it will be the means of helping us get the gang in our net. We'll go back to the ranch now, and I want



you to take pains to make the ranchman believe that we were frightened away from the log shanty. He will naturally tell Bill Myers and the rest of the cowboys, and that will make the villains think that they are secure. We'll come back here to-morrow night, after we have got all the information we want, and clean this shanty out. Ghosts, eh? Ha, ha, ha! As if the galoots could fool us that way! Why, it is a game that is so childish that I don't see how they could believe that it would work."

They rode back to the ranch and found the girls up and waiting for them.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE CATTLE BRANDERS "AT HOME."

The four villains Aleck had left to go and attend to the cattle they had managed to drive so far from the range had the luck to find the little herd before the cowboys belonging to the Big G Ranch came along.

The cattle branders had the necessary tools with them, so a fire was started in a little hollow, and then, as fast as a steer could be caught and brought up it was branded with the altered brand.

The big G was turned into a Q with little or no trouble, as far as making the mark was concerned.

The fact that it was a new mark and could be detected did not worry the men in the least.

There was the brand, and they claimed to own the cattle bearing it.

There was only one way to beat them at their game, and that was to catch them in the act and to gain possession of the brands they used.

If the cattle had not strayed much farther than the cowboys thought they would the branders would not have been so successful in their game.

As it was, they only got two dozen of them fixed with the altered brand, and succeeded in keeping them from the main herd, which, as has been stated, numbered barely a hundred.

But two dozen cattle amounted to quite a lot, especially as they were in fine condition, and there was a market close at hand.

By clever work the four cattle branders kept the steers going the way they wanted them to, and an hour or so later, when the cowboys from the Big G Ranch came along and rounded up the stampeded cattle they were just about one-fourth short on them.

They happened to catch sight of the others, and those driving them, and after they got the herd headed in the right direction they came galloping up to them.

The cowboys knew the branders by sight, though they had never quite suspected that they were the ones guilty of the thieving that was going on.

When they came up the villains greeted them in a very friendly way, and then told them that they had recovered the cattle from a lot that had been scattered over the range.

The cowboys did not look at the steers closely enough to discover that the brands upon them were fresh, so

they soon left them and went on their way without suspecting anything wrong.

The rascally four drove them over to a herders' camp some ten miles away, and into another county, and sold them, as per appointment.

Then they made for their log cabin, which was called a ranch by those who knew it, because a few cattle were raised there.

It was close to dark when they got there, and just as they got something to eat ready Aleck, their leader, arrived.

It was a cleverly arranged shanty that the villains had.

Aleck was a sort of genius, and he had certainly followed out his hobby of "fixing up things to scare folks" to perfection.

There was really but one room to the building, but this had been curtained off with a big piece of canvas that was painted in almost exact imitation of the logs.

Under the floor in this part was a cellar, and it was here that the men had stored the various articles they had bought and stolen.

It so happened that Aleck at one time had been connected with a show in El Paso, and he had brought with him a few of the different things he had used in the business, after having been connected with a bank robbery and being forced to leave the town in a hurry.

Among these articles were a human skeleton that had been wired together, so that it might be taken apart and adjusted again in a short time.

There was also a big, tin horn, which could be used as a megaphone, and it was this that the groans and sepulchral voices came through when Young Wild West and Charlie entered the log shanty.

The five villains did not doubt for an instant that the two had been really scared, and they laughed heartily as they hurriedly left the building and mounted their horses.

They did not know that Jim Dart was with Wild and Charlie, and that he had been watching them through the window when they were startled by the clatter of hoofs.

If they had known all this they would not have been so elated.

It was Aleck who lifted the curtain and came out and extinguished the light.

But he took occasion to shut the door first.

"Jest put another bag up ter that blamed winder," he said. "I didn't know any one could see our light through it. Not that I care if them galoots comes back or not; but it will make it seem more mysterious-like if ther shanty is dark."

One of the men hastened to do his bidding and then a lantern was lighted.

The skeleton was picked up and bundled down the cellar through the open trap door.

The pot, with its contents, followed suit, and soon the room outside was in its former shape.

"Now, boys, I reckon it will be a good idea ter go downstairs, in case they do happen ter come back," said Aleck. "Young Wild West is a putty clever young galoot, 'cordin' ter what Bill says about him; but he can't stand skeletons an' noises from ther grave. Ha, ha, ha!"

It was very humorous, and they all laughed heartily.



The cellar, as it was called, was really the only living apartment in the log shanty.

It was dug in a bank of sand and was as dry as could be.

Ventilation was caused by a draught of pure air, which came in from a passage leading fifty feet away from the building, and thence up the chimney that was built of mud and sticks, the old-fashioned way.

The five cattle branders were soon down in the snug retreat and a bright light illumined the scene.

To one a little curious the cellar would have proved very interesting.

Pictures adorned the walls and there was some carpet on the board floor.

The furniture was such that would hardly be expected to be found in a well-kept ranch, much less an underground apartment beneath a log shanty on the prairie.

But the villains had obtained this one day when they held up a small party of emigrants, who were bound to some place in Mexico. They robbed them and forced them to leave on foot, and when they were out of sight they made off with the furniture and other household articles.

These, together with the articles Aleck had been able to bring with him from El Paso, made the place pretty well stocked.

The men slept in hammocks that were hung from the floor beams overhead.

The "ghost game" had not been going on long enough for the shanty to have the reputation of being hunted.

The fact was that the villains had not got things in operation until a few days before.

Those who knew the place at all called it Aleck's ranch, which was quite enough.

Just how Aleck expected to have this go on, when he was going to frighten those he did not like away from the building by his ghost trick, the villains probably never thought of.

The main business they were engaged in at present was branding and selling the cattle from the well-stocked Big G Ranch.

They were going to keep it up until they were forced to stop, too, and since Bill Myers, the foreman of the ranch, was running the crooked work for them, it seemed as though it could go on indefinitely.

The five men knew that Myers feared Young Wild West, but they had made the boy flee from the shanty in such a hurry that they laughed and declared that his fears were groundless.

"A galoot might be able ter put up a great fight an' shoot straight an' all that, but when it comes ter skeletons an' unearthly speakin', that's different," said one of them. "Young Wild West is only human, after all; an' anything human can't take a likin' ter things what ain't human."

"Well, I reckon we're human enough, ain't we?" asked Aleck, and then he laughed again, as he thought how our friends had been frightened from the shanty.

"Yes, we're human, all right," the villain who had spoken answered. "But it don't seem that way, not when you git ter groanin' through that tin horn."

"Well, that's a hobby of mine. I like ter scare folks,

especially them what thinks they're mighty smart. Jest wait till Bill hears about this. I reckon he'll be over here in ther mornin', anyhow. It may be that he'll hear about it, for it are most likely that Young Wild West will tell Graham about ther shanty here bein' haunted."

"He couldn't keep from tellin' about it. Who could, I'd like ter know?" asked one.

"Well, if we're asked anything about it we'll jest make out that we don't know nothin' about it. We'll say we wasn't here last night."

"That's it. We kin say that we was down to ther Fork on business."

The Fork referred to was a settlement about twenty miles south of the old log cabin, and was a sort of headquarters for the ranchmen of the surrounding country.

The five turned in a couple of hours later, well satisfied with what had happened.

The next morning, a little after eight, Bill Myers showed up, much to their satisfaction.

## CHAPTER IX.

### JIM AND THE BOY TENDERFOOT TAKE THE TRAIL.

The girls had spent the evening while Wild and his partners were away playing dominoes with Mrs. Graham, and it is safe to say that the latter had never spent a more pleasant evening.

The ranchman had passed the time reading a paper that was about two weeks old, though, it being new to him, it made no difference.

When our hero and his partners got back they were all more or less anxious to find out how they had made out.

"Didn't see nothin' of any one, did yer?" Graham asked.

"We saw a skeleton standing up in a log shanty about a dozen miles from here and heard some very strange noises," Wild answered. "I reckon we struck a haunted house, all right."

"What?"

The ranchman looked surprised.

"Yes," went on Wild, casting a look at Arietta that meant that she need not be surprised at anything he said, "we were riding along over the range, when we saw a log shanty with a light in the window. It was not a very bright light, but it was a light, just the same. When we got to it we dismounted and went to the door, finding it open a little way. Then, as Charlie and I went inside, a bright light shot up and we saw a grinning skeleton before us. Groans and voices that appeared to come from the grave sounded then, and we thought we had better get out. We don't want anything to do with haunted houses, do we, boys?"

"Not much!" answered Jim, while the scout shook his head, as though he thoroughly agreed with him.

"Why, Wild!" exclaimed the scout's wife, looking at him in a puzzled way. "You don't believe in ghosts, you know you don't."



Just then Arietta caught her eye and the look she gave her meant that it was all right.

"No, I never did believe in ghosts, Anna," our hero answered. "But we thought it time to get out, and we did so."

"I don't know where yer could have been, unless it was Aleck's place," said the ranchman, shaking his head. "He's ther man what was here jest afore night. He's got some few cattle over there, an' he's supposed ter live in ther old log shanty with ther few men what works fur him. There ain't nobody as knows much about him an' his gang; but from what I've seen of him he's a mighty quiet feller an' minds his own business putty well. It seems sorter strange that there should be anything like ghosts in his shanty; if any one else had told me this I wouldn't have believed 'em."

"Well, I have told you just what happened, Mr. Graham," said Wild, shaking his head in a solemn way.

"I'll ask Myers about it in ther mornin'," the ranchman retorted. "Maybe he's heard somethin' about it."

For half an hour the topic was kept up, and then they all went to the sleeping quarters that had been assigned to them.

Our hero took care to get up with the sun, for he wanted Bill Myers to know all about what he had told Graham, and he thought the villain might go away rather early.

But, as early as it was, he found the ranchman up and out of the house.

Wild walked over to the shed and found him there, talking to the foreman.

"Come here, Wild!" said Graham, calling to him. "I reckon Bill don't bear you no grudge fur what happened ther night afore last. I've been talking to him, an' he says as how he heard Aleck say that there was mighty strange noises in ther old log shanty. But he says he never heard him say anything about seein' skeletons an' bright lights an' sich like."

"What was it that you an' your pards seen, if yer don't mind tellin' me?" spoke up the foreman.

Wild told him all about it, making out that he was very much afraid of going to the place again.

Myers could not conceal the delight this caused him, though he no doubt thought he did.

"It's mighty funny," he declared. "I'll run across Aleck or some of his men some time, an' I'll try an' find out somethin' about it. Boss, I s'pose yer know that ther boys got in with ther cattle we was lookin' fur?"

"No! Did they, Bill?" queried Graham.

"Yes, late last night. They're all inside asleep now. There was a little over seventy of ther steers, an' they landed 'em all safe. I reckon we didn't lose none, after all."

"Well, I'm mighty glad ter hear that they got 'em, though I'm dead sartin that there was a hundred or more what was missin'."

"There was easily a hundred in the herd that came so near running the boy down," spoke up Wild, watching the foreman's face as he spoke.

"Yer think so?" and the ranchman's face lighted up.

"I would bet on it," was the reply.

"Well, if yer was ter bet on it how could yer prove it,

Young Wild West?" Myers asked, looking at the boy, defiantly.

"Well, that is true. But I will bet on it, so if you care to take me up, here's a hundred dollars."

"That would be a foolish bet ter make, when yer know that yer didn't have no time ter count how many there was," said the foreman, shrugging his shoulders.

"Well, there may be a way to prove it. Here's the money, if you care about covering it."

"Well, I wouldn't take ther word of your pards or ther boy tenderfoot," retorted the villain, trying his best to get out of it.

"You need not do that. We will wait till we catch the galoots who set the grass on fire; then we will prove it by what they have to say."

"That's foolish talk, Young Wild West. Keep your money in your clothes. You've got a great deal more of it than I have, an' I ain't goin' ter tie up any of what I have got. I might want ter use it a long time afore them greasers is caught."

"All right, Bill. Don't ever say that I didn't offer you a good thing in the way of a bet."

Wild put the money back in his pocket.

It was just then that Billy Dover came out of the house.

The boy had been tired out, and he had retired before our hero and his partners returned the night before.

Consequently he knew nothing of what had happened until his aunt told him a few minutes after he got up.

"How about the ghosts you saw last night, Young Wild West?" he called out, as he ran up. "What was it, some humbug to frighten you?"

"Well, there isn't much of a humbug about a human skeleton and groans and voices in a room where there is no chance of any one being hidden to make them, Billy," Wild answered, shaking his head and assuming a very serious look.

"No; that's right enough," and Bill changed his manner instantly.

Bill Myers smiled in a peculiar way and then went back into the shed.

Wild walked back to the house with the ranchman and the boy tenderfoot.

Billy wanted to know all about the peculiar adventure of the night before, so our hero told him what he thought he ought to know just then.

As they went in the house Charlie and Jim showed up.

Wild called them aside and said, in a low tone of voice:

"Myers knows all about it now. He will be lighting out to see the cattle branders before long, see if he don't."

"Good! Are yer goin' ter foller him, Wild?" Charlie asked.

"Well, I thought about letting Jim and the boy do that. We will stay around here for a while."

"I'll be glad to go, and it is quite likely that Billy will, too," Jim spoke up.

"Well, hurry up and get your breakfast, then."

Wild then went to the boy tenderfoot and said:

"I reckon it will do you good to take a ride out on the range with Jim this morning. He'll be apt to show you something about riding."



"All right," was the quick reply.

"Get your breakfast, then, for Jim always likes to get out early."

The breakfast was not long in coming, and then they all sat down and enjoyed it, the girls being up in time.

But when Jim went out to get the horses with the boy he found that Bill Myers had just gone out.

This made little difference, however, and he soon got ready.

Then, with the delighted Billy at his side, he galloped away on the fresh trail that showed on the dew-covered grass.

Hop Wah was a little late in getting up this particular morning.

When he did show up he found Wing eating his breakfast in the kitchen, and he promptly joined him.

Mrs. Graham had been telling Wing about the ghost Wild and his partners had seen the night before, and as soon as Hop sat down she started in to let him know all about it.

The clever Chinaman was not a little surprised.

But when she declared that Wild, Charlie and Jim had left the log shanty very much frightened, he shook his head and grinned.

"Ley no 'flaid of um ghosts, so be," he declared. "Must be some funny business, allee samee."

But the good woman would not have it that way.

As soon as Hop had finished his breakfast he sought Wild and asked him about it.

"Never mind, Hop," was the reply. "I reckon it is all right. Don't say any more about it just now. I reckon we'll get the ghost before long."

Hop understood now, for he was quick to catch on to a thing, and when told to do so he always kept a still tongue.

"Me knowee velly muchee well lat you no 'flaid of um ghosts, so be, Mislér Wild," he declared.

"Well, if any one wants to think that we were afraid, just let them do so, Hop."

"Allee light, Mislér Wild."

## CHAPTER X.

### THE GAME OF "DLAW POKEE."

Hop was not long in finding out that the cowboys had got back.

He was always interested in cowboys, probably because he could generally find victims among them at playing draw poker.

He was not long in seeking Sam Pratt, the man who had stuck to Bill Dover when the foreman was against him, and, smiling in his cheerful way, he observed:

"Velly nicee morning, so be."

"Yes, it's fine, Hop," answered the cowboy, who had learned the Celestial's name from being in camp with him.

Hop knew his name, too, and he continued, blandly:

"You velly muchee smartee cowboy, Mislér Platt."

"No bouquets, please," laughed the cowboy. "I heard

all about you, you know. You are a very smart Chineee, and that is the truth. When you say that I am smart that isn't ther truth. That's ther difference between us, Hop."

"Allee light," Hop answered. "Me likee play a lilllee gamee dlaw pokie, so be. But you allee samee 'flaid me cheatee you."

"Well, Young Wild West told us you would, didn't he?"

"Lat light; but you watchee velly muchee closee, and you see me allee samee cheatee, len you shootee off um pigtail! Lat velly muchee square?"

"Well, that is a pretty good offer, I reckon."

The fact was that Sam Pratt was very fond of poker.

Most of the cowboys were, as it was a means of passing the time away in their leisure hours, even if the ante was very small.

It had been payday but three or four days before, and most of them had a big part of their wages left.

Pratt never spent all he made, anyhow, so he had a couple of hundred dollars stowed away for a "rainy day."

But he could not resist the temptation to get in a game with the Chinaman, especially as such an inducement had been put out.

If Hop was caught cheating he was to have his pigtail shot off!

Of course, none of the cowboys would have gone as far as that.

But the chances are that they would make him pay back what he had won from them if he was caught playing any way unfair.

Pratt turned and walked into the shed, where the other two were cleaning up the remains of their breakfast.

Pratt grinned as the Chinaman came in after him.

"Here's Hop, boys!" he said. "What do yer think? He's lookin' fur a game of draw!"

"He is, eh?" answered one. "Well, I'd jest like ter see some of his wonderful work with the cards—blamed if I wouldn't! Young Wild West has warned us ag'in playin' with him, but that makes no difference; I'm willin' ter tackle him fur a few hands, anyhow. We ain't got a thing ter do this forenoon but ter lay around. Poker is jest my hobby."

"Me, too!" spoke up the other.

Pratt gave a nod of satisfaction.

Hop's face wore a very innocent expression now, and to look at him one would have thought that he was anything but a card sharp.

The rough table was soon cleared, and then the Celestial smiled and sat down.

As the others took their places he produced a new deck of cards.

"Yer carry 'em right with yer, I see," observed Pratt.

"Me allee samee keepee plenty cards, so be," was the reply.

"Well, I reckon I'll look ther deck over first, if yer don't mind."

Hop had no objections whatever, since the cards were perfectly straight.

Pratt looked them over carefully, and then, to make sure, counted them.



He tossed out the extra card called the "joker," which comes with every pack, saying:

"Take that, Hop; maybe yer kin make an ace out of it when yer have got three an' need another one."

"Allee light," was the reply; and then the clever Chinaman took the card, look at it thoughtfully for a moment and laid it down on the table, face up.

"You makee lilee mistakee," he said, cheerfully. "Lat not um jokee; lat um seven of hearts, so be."

Sam Pratt looked at the card in blank amazement.

He was absolutely sure that he had tossed the joker over to the Chinaman.

But there was the card, and it was the seven of hearts!

As he started to run over the cards to correct the mistake Hop picked up the card, looked at it and then laid it down again.

"Lat um jokee, allee light!" he exclaimed. "Me makee lilee mistakee, so be."

If the cowboys had been surprised before, they were astonished now.

All three had seen the seven of hearts lying on the table, and yet it turned out to be the joker of the new pack, after all.

Hop now took the card and placed it in one of his pockets.

No one knew how he had managed to puzzle them that way, but it was very easy for him to do it, since he could do sleight-of-hand tricks to perfection.

He had simply taken a card from another pack just like the one he had laid on the table, and it was easy enough for him to substitute it for the joker.

"Me no cheatee," he declared, smilingly, as Pratt slowly shuffled the cards. "Me velly goodee Chinee; me go to um Sunday school in Flisco, so be."

The cowboys acted as though they had their doubts about his being so very honest, for they could not get over what had just happened.

None of them could bring himself to think that Hop had changed the card, for they were sure they had seen it all the time.

But they were not sure, after all; they simply thought they were.

"Whattée um ante you play?" Hop asked, when they had cut for deal, and it fell to the cowboy on his left.

"Oh, we want to play ter pass ther time away, more'n anything else," answered Pratt. "S'pose we start off with a quarter?"

"Allee light," was the smiling rejoinder. "Me no play to win um money; me wantee showee you lat me no cheatee, so be."

The three men actually thought that he meant what he said—that he was going to be strictly honest with them, in fact.

But they were badly deceived, as will be seen.

The first hand was a rather tame affair, since no one got anything higher than a pair of nines, and Pratt took the pot, which amounted to about a dollar and a half.

It was his deal now and, being able to manipulate the cards pretty well, he proceeded to give himself a good hand.

He succeeded remarkably well, and Hop knew just what he was up to, for he was too sharp to be fooled by a

man who knew less about that kind of business than he did himself.

But he did not care how much the cowboys cheated.

The game went on and no one won a great deal.

After a while Hop thought it time to get in some of his fine work, so when the deal came to him for the second time he fixed up the cards just as he wanted to, and neither of the three cowboys dreamed of such a thing as any cheating on his part.

No big hands had been held so far, and this was the time when they were all going to hold them.

Hop gave them each a pair to start with.

Pratt got kings, the man next to him queens and the third a pair of jacks.

The Chinaman did not get a pair himself, but he was going to have just what he wanted on the draw.

The ante being up, they all came in for the draw.

Each took three cards, as might be expected, and when they found that they had four of a kind they felt rather elated.

But each thought he was the only one who held such a hand, of course.

Hop drew to an ace and got the other three.

The betting got a little warm this time.

The cowboy with the four jacks jumped it up to five dollars at the first chance he got.

Pratt met the raise and lifted it two, just to lead him on, probably.

He was a little surprised to see the other man come in and lift it five.

Hop shook his head, as though he did not think he stood any chance, and then he met the raise and put it up five better.

"Maybe um makee lilee bluffee," he said, smiling blandly. "Me no 'flaid to lose um lilee money, so be."

Then it went around again, and when it came Hop's turn he had to put up twenty dollars to meet the amount.

But he cheerfully did this, and then raised it ten dollars.

"Let her go!" exclaimed the cowboy with the four jacks. "There's five more, jest ter make it interestin'."

"That's about all I kin find in my clothes, so I'll have to call yer," said the man with the four queens.

"All right; call it is, then," and Pratt put up the amount required.

"Me havee see you, so be," observed Hop. "Whattée you gottee?"

"Four jacks!" called out the cowboy, as he showed them and reached for the money.

"Hold on!" spoke up the man with the four queens. "I reckon I kin beat you."

"An' I reckon I kin beat yer both!" cried Pratt, as he showed his four kings.

"Me gottee four lilee aces," said Hop, innocently. "Velly nicee hand, so be."

The cowboys were amazed.

They looked at each other in silence for a second or two, and then Sam Pratt jumped to his feet and exclaimed:

"Serves us right, boys! We wouldn't take Young Wild West's advice. He's winged us fur fair; an' we didn't catch him cheatin', either."



Hop raked in the pot and was stowing the money in his pocket when Wild and Charlie came into the shed.

## CHAPTER XI.

### WILD TALKS TO THE CATTLE BRANDERS.

"What's the matter, boys?" asked Wild, as he noticed how sheepish the three cowboys looked.

"We jest let him go an' do it," was Pratt's reply. "But it was our fault. He promised ter let us cut his pigtail off if we catched him cheatin'. He got our money, an' we didn't catch him, so I reckon ther blamed old pigtail stays where it is!"

"Serves yer right," spoke up Cheyenne Charlie. "Yer oughter have knowed better than ter think that yer could catch ther heathen galoot cheatin'. He don't allow no one ter catch him at it; that's ther reason he kin win whenever he feels like it. Why, he kin beat ther best card sharp what ever struck a minin' camp!"

"How much did you win, Hop?" asked Wild.

"Not velly muchee," was the reply.

"Well, shell it out, whatever it is!"

"No—no!" spoke up Pratt, shaking his head. "I won't take my money back. He won it, an' it's his."

The others declared the same thing, but our hero knew that the clever Chinaman had beaten them through his sleight-of-hand work, and he did not want him to take their money.

"Just find out how much you each lost, and then take it back," he said. "Hop won't care; he has got plenty of money without that."

"Me allee samee gottee plenty money, so be," Hop remarked, and then he showed a roll of greenbacks that almost dazzled the eyes of the cowboys.

This had the effect of making them feel as though they might as well take back what they had lost.

It was soon figured up, and then the Chinaman turned it over, smiling as though it did not make the least bit of difference to him.

"Now," said Wild, "I'll tell you again not to gamble with him. He will beat you at any game you try. Poker is not the only thing he knows. I reckon he understands about every game there is going that gambling can be done with."

The cowboys nodded.

"I reckon once is enough fur me," Pratt said.

"An' me, too!" exclaimed the other two, speaking as if in one voice.

Wild and Charlie now left the shed and went and got their horses.

They meant to take a ride around, and fetch up at the log shanty after a while.

Hop, having no further chance to gamble, turned and went back to the house.

Our hero and the scout soon mounted their horses.

But just as they were about to ride off Arietta called to them from the porch of the house.

"What's up?" the young deadshot asked, as he turned and rode toward the house.

"We want to go with you, just for a little exercise," his sweetheart answered.

"Yes," spoke up the scout's wife. "Eloise has decided to take a lesson in bread-making from Mrs. Graham, and she does not care to go out. We would like to go along with you, providing you are not going on any special business."

"All right; come right along, then. Hop, you go and get the horses ready."

"Allee light, Misler Wild," said Hop, who was sitting on the porch.

Away he went, and the girls hastened to get ready to take the ride.

It was not because they did not get enough of the saddle, but it was different going out for a little while than riding all the day long through a wilderness or unbroken plain.

As they rode along nothing, but the grazing cattle could be seen, save their natural surroundings; there was nothing like a man or a horse in sight.

But when they had covered about five miles, and reached the top of a little ridge, they suddenly came in sight of four horsemen.

They were easily half a mile away, but it did not take Young Wild West two seconds to tell that one of them was the villain called Aleck.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "There are some of the cattle branders, I reckon. We'll keep right on ahead, and they will most likely turn over toward us. You two girls will draw them, if nothing else. It is likely that they are not used to seeing ladies riding around on the prairie."

"That's right, Wild," answered the scout, while Arietta and Anna nodded and smiled.

The four men had seen them by this time, and as our friends rode on they were seen to change their course slightly, so their paths would cross.

In a very few minutes they met.

"Hello, Young Wild West!" called out Aleck, for it was he, sure enough.

"Hello!" answered Wild. "Say, you're just the fellow I want to see! What kind of a place do you live in, anyhow?"

"Well, it ain't much of a shanty, I reckon," Aleck answered in a way that was meant to be innocent.

"How many of you live there?"

"There's five of us altogether. Here's four now; ther other man is home lookin' after things jest now."

Wild saw that the man was a pretty good liar, to use the expression, and he thought he would give him a chance to go further.

"Were any of you at home last night?" he queried, just as though he was anxious to find out something that was bothering him.

"No; we was all down to ther Fork, an' we didn't git home till some time after midnight," Aleck answered, readily.

Wild shook his head.

"Why, what's ther matter?" Aleck asked, a twinkle of amusement and delight in his eyes.

"Well, I'll tell you," said Wild. "That log shanty of yours is haunted, and haunted pretty bad, too!"

"Well, I don't know about that. We have heard queer



sounds in it, but we always laid it ter 'magination. Was you over ter see us?"

"We happened along that way and, seeing a light in the window, we stopped."

"What time was this?"

Wild told him the whole story then, and Aleck and his men seemed to be greatly interested.

There was no doubt that they were much amused, too.

"Did yer find your cattle yet?" Charlie asked, changing the subject.

"No," was the reply. "I wonder if Graham's cowboys got what was astray of his?"

"They got all but about two dozen," Wild answered, quickly.

"Then some one must have stole 'em."

"Yes, the cattle branders must have got them, and, after changing the brand on them, took them away to some place and sold them. That is being done right along around here, I reckon."

"It's about time it was stopped," said Aleck, shaking his head.

"Well, we are going to put a stop to it, all right."

"Yer are, eh?"

There was a smile of amusement on the villain's face as he asked the question.

"Yes, I reckon we'll manage to run across the galoots before very long. We are out looking for them now."

"Yer don't s'pose they would hang around as close as this to ther ranch, after cleanin' up some of ther cattle, do yer?"

"You can't tell what they might do. We are likely to strike them at any time, I think."

"Well, I hope yer do. If yer want any help just call on us at any time. I reckon it's as much ter us as it is ter Graham. He's got ten times ther cattle that we have, which makes a loss all ther worse ter us."

The four cattle branders now turned and rode away.

As they did this Wild noticed that one of them carried a bundle that was done up in a bag.

This was strapped to his saddlebags, and from one end of it the unmistakable handle of a branding iron protruded.

"Hello!" exclaimed the boy, as he urged his horse to him. "Are you going to do any branding to-day?"

"Yes; we've got a few calves ter brand," was the reply, while the man turned red in the face.

"Is that so?"

"Yes, that's right; ain't it, Aleck?"

"Of course, it's right!" exclaimed Aleck. "Why should he doubt yer, anyhow?"

"What is your mark?" Wild went on to ask.

"What's that?" Aleck hastened to say.

"What mark do you use on your cattle—your branding mark, I mean?"

"A is my mark."

"A is for Aleck, eh?"

"Yes."

"I should think you would use the initial of your last name."

"Well, I don't happen ter have any last name. Aleck is ther only name I ever knowed. My father an' mother were killed by Injuns when I was a little boy, too young

ter know my name. Ther folks what brought me up jest called me Aleck, so I never bothered with any other name."

"Is that so? Well, if you didn't care to have a name it's your business, not mine. But let's see, your branding irons, will you?"

"No!"

The answer came quick and sharp.

Wild was close enough to reach out and grab the handle that protruded from the end of the bundle, and as quick as a flash he did so.

Out it came, and as he looked at the letter on the end he saw that it was a Q.

"That's a mighty funny A, Aleck," he said, coolly. "Queer, isn't it?"

The cattle branders were dismayed.

## CHAPTER XII.

### OUR FRIENDS GET THE CROOKED BRANDS.

Aleck soon found the use of his tongue.

"That brandin' iron was found a little while ago by ther man yer took it from," he declared. "We thought we had a mighty good clue as ter ther findin' of ther galoots what's been stealin' our cattle, so we was ridin' off ter work it up. We didn't want you ter see it, 'cause we'd like ter have ther credit of runnin' down their cattle branders."

"Oh, I see. Well, that is quite a brand, isn't it? But let me see the others you have there."

"You've seen enough, I reckon, Young Wild West! Jest let us alone now, or we'll have ter be a little harsh with yer. Don't meddle too much with other folks' business, is my advice."

Wild quickly drew a revolver.

"I want that bundle!" he said sternly.

"That's what's ther matter!" exclaimed Cheyenne Charlie, as he whipped out his brace of guns. "If you galoots try ter be a little harsh with us I reckon you'll git your medicine, that's all!"

Arietta, too, drew a revolver from her belt.

The girl was ready to do her share, in case it became necessary.

"I reckon you'll let us see the branding irons, won't you?" our hero asked, coolly, while a smile played about his mouth.

"Oh, we don't care so much," replied Aleck. "There's ther whole outfit that Tom found this mornin'. You kin see what's in it, if yer want ter. We thought as how we might as well git ther credit fur findin' ther irons, an' that's why we didn't want no one else ter see 'em jest now. Tom, let 'em see 'em."

Tom, as he was called, quickly unloosened the bundle and handed it to our hero.

"Thank you!" the boy answered, calmly. "We'll take these back to the ranch with us. Then we'll know that there won't be any of the cattle belonging to the Big G Ranch to have the brands on them altered for a while. It is a mighty good thing that you fellows found this bundle.



If any of your own branding irons are in it I'll take them out and let you keep them."

"There ain't any of ours there. Ther bundle is jest as we found it, 'cept that we opened it an' had a look at what was in it. I tied it up ag'in jest like it was first off."

Wild saw that Charlie and Arietta would take care of the villains, in case they tried to act against them, so he put his revolver back in the holster and proceeded to unwrap the irons.

There were three of them, and when he looked at them he found that the mark on them was meaningless.

It was really the curved line, with the necessary tail to it, to make a Q of a G.

The young deadshot understood it right away, for he had seen such brands before.

"This is pretty good," he said, looking at one of the brands. "If this is burned into the hide of a steer so it connects with the G on Graham's cattle, it will leave a Q. Queer, isn't it?"

Aleck tried to smile, but he made a miserable failure of it.

It was evident that he was in a very uneasy frame of mind just then.

"Well," observed our hero, "I reckon we'll take these irons to the ranch and let Mr. Graham see them. He will understand how easy it has been for him to lose his cattle then."

"So yer ain't goin' ter let us have ther credit of doin' anything towards findin' out who ther gang is, eh, Young Wild West?" queried Aleck, now speaking quite boldly.

"Oh, yes. You galoots can have all the credit. But we'll do the finding. I thought first that you might know something about the game, but since you say that you picked up the bundle, I suppose I'll have to believe you. Now, just strike out, and see if you can't run the cattle branders down before night!"

The villains were glad to get off so easily, for they had felt sure that they were in trouble.

They rode away at a gallop, and then, as our hero watched them, he remarked:

"I thought it about as well to let them go, though we all know that they are the cattle branders. We will go back to the ranch, and take these branding irons with us. Then when night comes we'll go over and have a look at the ghost, and hear the strange noises. I reckon that will about wind up the game."

This was satisfactory to Charlie, so they turned and swung around for the ranch, hoping to meet Jim and Billy Dover on the way.

But they did not come across them, and, knowing that Jim was perfectly able to take care of himself in case the two met with any trouble with Bill Myers, they did not think much about it.

Graham was at the house when they arrived, and it was not long before he was looking at the identical irons that had changed the brand on his cattle, so they could not be identified by his men.

Wild told him just how he had come in possession of the irons, and then he looked at him and said:

"Mr. Graham, I am going to tell you something. There has been a whole lot of crooked work on your ranch, and

your foreman has been responsible for it all. Bill Myers is in league with the cattle branders, and he has made it possible for them to play their game successfully. He is a rank scoundrel, and he has got to take his medicine when the time comes. The gang over in the old log cabin will be scooped in to-night, and so will the ghost! We were not frightened last night, as we made out; we simply thought it best to make it appear that way, so you would tell Bill Myers about it and make him think that we were afraid of the place. I want you to understand the whole thing now, before we go any further."

"Well," answered the ranchman, after he had gathered his thoughts, "I believe every word you say, Young Wild West. I'm goin' ter let yer run this business ter suit yourself. You said yer wouldn't be long in runnin' down ther cattle branders, an' it looks as though yer won't be, either."

"Not very long, Mr. Graham. Why, we listened at the window of the log cabin last night before we went in, and we heard the galoots talking about their business. They let us know all there was to the game. If they believe they scared us away from the shanty they are very much mistaken, as they will find out to-night. I want you to go along with us when we make the roundup."

"All right," was the reply. "I'll only be too glad ter go."

"But you must not say a word to Bill Myers about it."

"Oh, no!"

"Here comes ther galoot now," said Cheyenne Charlie, who happened to be looking over the prairie just then.

Sure enough, the villainous foreman was coming along at an easy gait.

Wild knew that he must have been over to the log shanty, and as there was but one man there, he must have remained quite a little time with him.

"Do yer want him ter know anything about these brandin' irons?" the ranchman asked.

"Yes; you might as well let him know all about it. But tell him that we picked them up. Don't let him know that we took them from his friends, the cattle branders."

Myers rode up to the house and dismounted.

As our friends had turned their horses out to graze he had no way of knowing they had been away from the ranch, unless he had seen them.

But this he had not done, as it proved.

"Where have yer been, Bill?" asked the ranchman, as the villain dismounted.

"Out scouting around," was the reply.

"Did you meet Billy an' Jim Dart on your way?"

"No," was the reply. "Did they go out?"

"Yes, ther boy wanted ter learn how ter do some fast ridin', so one of Young Wild West's pards offered ter give him a few points. Did yer find out anything about ther cattle branders, Bill?"

Myers shook his head in the negative.

"Not a thing!" he declared.

"You wasn't as lucky as Young Wild West an' Cheyenne Charlie was, then. Look what they found about five miles out on ther range, a little over an hour ago."

The ranchman pointed to the branding irons, which



were lying on the porch, covered with the bag they had been wrapped in.

"What did yer find?" asked the foreman, looking at our hero, expectantly.

"Oh, we found the tools the branders have been using to change the mark on Mr. Graham's cattle, that's all," was the reply.

"Is that so?"

Myers' face changed color, and it was plain that he was much astonished.

But he soon put on a cool way, and then he inquired as to how the brands had been found.

But our friends did not let him know anything further than that they had found them above five miles from the ranch.

Bill Myers looked at the irons curiously, just as though he did not know all about them.

"Do yer s'pose that thing would change a G to a Q?" he asked, as he held up one of the brands that was used to alter the mark.

"Let's try it an' see jest what it will do," suggested Cheyenne Charlie. "Boss, git your regular iron an' fetch it around to the kitchen. We'll heat ther irons an' try it."

The scout had something in his mind just then that he did not let out.

Graham lost no time in getting his regular branding iron, and then, to save the trouble of kindling a fire, they all went around to the kitchen, where there was a good fire in the stove.

Charlie took the two irons he wanted and placed them in the fire.

Just then Myers removed his coat and hung it on a nail that was driven in the back of the house.

The scout looked at the coat and then he gave a nod of satisfaction.

### CHAPTER XIII.

#### BILL MYERS TAKES HIS MEDICINE.

While the irons were being heated the girls and Mrs. Graham came outside to learn what was going on.

Then Hop appeared on the scene.

"What are you going to do, Charlie?" asked Anna, as she watched her husband fooling with the irons he had placed in the fire.

"I'm goin' ter show yer how easy it is ter make a Q out of a G," was the reply.

"Oh! I understand."

"You makee allee samee burnee, Mislér Charlie?" asked Hop, getting very curious.

"Yes, an' if yer don't look out I'll put ther brand on you!" was the reply.

"No puttee um bland on poor Chineee; me no cow, so be."

There was a laugh at this, even Myers joining in.

The brands were soon heated, and then the scout came out with one in either hand.

Probably they were not hot enough to brand a steer, but they would answer the purpose the scout had in his mind.

"Hop," said he, "jest spread ther back of that coat out, will yer? I'm goin' ter brand it."

He nodded to the buckskin coat Bill Myers had hung on the nail.

"I guess not!" cried the foreman, as he sprang to get the coat.

But Wild, realizing what Charlie was up to, pushed him back.

"Let him do it," he said, persuasively. "The coat is an old one, anyhow, and it will look all right with a big G on the back of it."

Somehow, there was something in the manner of the young deadshot that told the foreman that he had better give in.

He was getting decidedly uncomfortable now.

Hop stepped up and, smiling blandly, pulled out the coat, so the back was displayed.

The scout quickly thrust the regular brand of the ranchman against it, and as soon as it began to smoke he pulled it away and the letter G was there as plain as though it had been painted with black paint.

"That looks putty good," he said, nodding with satisfaction. "Now I'll alter it somewhat."

Up went the other brand, right where it ought to go, and the next minute it was pulled away and the letter G had changed to a big Q.

"That's what I calls putty good!" the scout exclaimed. "Now, then, Wild, what's ter be done with ther coat?"

"Bill will wear it, just the same," was the reply.

"No, I won't!" retorted the foreman, angrily. "I don't want no brand on my back, I reckon."

"Well, you don't need any to tell what you are," said our hero, coolly.

"What do yer mean, Young Wild West?"

"I mean that you are responsible for all the crooked work that has been going on here! Do you understand that? Now, just hold up your hands, for you're my prisoner!"

Wild thought he might as well spring the trap then as any other time.

If Myers was captured the five villains who were in league with him would know nothing of it until they were captured.

Myers turned as pale as death.

"Wha—what do yer mean?" he stammered.

"Bill, you're crooked!" exclaimed the ranchman, his eyes flashing. "You've been playin' me false right along. You've helped ter steal thousands of dollars worth of cattle from me! You've got ter go ter jail, Bill Myers!"

"Never!" was the defiant shout, and, with a bound, the rascally foreman was away.

He got around the corner of the house and made for his horse.

Charlie was going to bring him down by a shot in the calf of the leg, but Wild stopped him.

"Leave him to me," he said. "I'll soon get him."

The dashing young deadshot ran for his horse and quickly threw the saddle on him.

Myers had a little difficulty in catching his horse, but no one offered to interfere with him after Young Wild West said he should be left to him.

They could have easily caught him, too.



By the time the villain was a hundred yards away from the house Wild was in the act of mounting his sorrel stallion.

His friends knew that he would overtake the foreman before he got half a mile.

The sorrel was too speedy for anything in the line of horseflesh on the Big G Ranch.

But Myers did not seem to think that he was going to be caught very easily.

It was his desire to get to the log cabin with his friends, and once there he felt that he would be safe, for a while, anyhow.

But when he had covered about a quarter of a mile he looked around and saw how useless was his effort.

Young Wild West was swooping down upon him like a cyclone.

He pulled a revolver from his belt.

"Keep back or I'll shoot you or your horse!" he shouted.

"You put that back, or I'll drop you!" was the retort.

"I mean what I say, Bill Myers!"

There was a revolver in Wild's hand now, and the foreman realized that his life was not worth a pinch of snuff if he refused to obey.

He dropped the weapon back into the holster and then tried to get his broncho to a faster gait.

But it was a vain attempt.

On came the sorrel like a whirlwind, Young Wild West swinging his trusty lariat, ready for the throw that would settle the race.

A cry of rage and fear combined left the lips of the crooked foreman.

Then—

Whizz!

The lasso flew out and circled through the air.

Down came the noose over the heads of both horse and rider.

Bill's dodging proved futile, and, with a jerk, he came to the ground with the broncho.

Our hero was on the spot before he could get up.

"I reckon I've got you, Bill," he said, smiling at him, coolly. "You couldn't have got away, anyhow, for if I had not stopped Charlie he would have shot you in the leg long before you got your horse. I just wanted a little practice with the rope, so I let you get ahead. Just hold up your hands, please."

The broncho got up as soon as it was released and galloped back to its quarters, minus its rider.

Bill Myers was quickly disarmed, and then, fastening the rope about his body, his arms pinned to his sides, Wild mounted his horse and started back for the house.

There was nothing to do but for Bill to leg it along, for if he refused to walk he would be dragged.

As he was brought to the house Graham promptly laid his hand on his shoulder and exclaimed:

"Bill, you've got ter suffer fur what you've done. I'm goin' ter send right over to ther Fork fur ther marshal. I'll make ther charge ag'in yer that will either hang yer or send yer ter prison. I mean every word I say, Bill Myers!"

"All right," was the reply. "You were too much of a thick-headed fool to find out anything yourself, boss!"

If Young Wild West hadn't happened along you'd never knowed about ther crooked work. You was losin' cattle, an' that was all yer did know. Ha, ha, ha! I'm satisfied."

The villain really acted as though he was partly satisfied, anyhow.

What he said did not tend to lessen the ranchman's wrath any.

"You'll git it all right, see if yer don't!" he exclaimed. "Oh, you scoundrel, you! To think that yer fooled me this way!"

The prisoner laughed again.

Graham was mad enough to strike him, bound and helpless to defend himself, as he was.

But Wild soon quieted him.

"I reckon you had better wait till toward night to send over to the Fork," he said. "We don't want the help of any one to get the ghost to-night. I reckon there is enough to do that."

Myers flashed an angry glance at the boy.

"Yer have been foolin' us about bein' afraid, I reckon," he said. "Well, all right. But yer ain't comin' out of this as nice as yer think yer will, maybe."

There was something that was significant in the way he spoke, and our hero looked at him sharply.

"Where are Billy and my partner?" he asked, suddenly.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the villain. "You catch on putty easy, don't yer? Jest find 'em, that's all!"

"Oh, we'll find them all right. But you just tell me what you know about them, or I'll begin to clip off your ears with bullets! Do you hear what I say, you sneaking coyote?"

Out came the boy's revolvers, and Myers promptly lost his bluffing way.

"I don't know nothin' about 'em," he said, quickly. "I seen 'em follerin' my trail this mornin', an' that's all I know."

"All right. Charlie and I will start out in search of them, leaving you in charge of the boss. Don't let him get away, no matter what you do, Mr. Graham."

"Yer kin bet your life I won't, Wild!" was the retort.

Five minutes later Young Wild West and Cheyenne Charlie were galloping in the direction of the log cabin.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### WHAT HAPPENED TO JIM AND BILLY.

We will now turn our attention to Jim Dart and Billy Dover.

They were not so very long in covering the distance between the ranch and the log cabin, and when they neared the latter they slowed down and let their horses walk.

Once or twice they had caught sight of Bill Myers, but he had been lost to view each time, either from getting behind a ridge or a clump of trees.

But Jim knew that he had gone direct to the shanty, for there was the trail to prove it.

"Billy," said he, "we must be a bit careful now. We



know that we have got villains to deal with, and there is no telling just what they might do."

"Do you really think that Bill Myers is a villain?" the boy asked, looking closely at his companion.

"Yes, there is no question about it. We know all about him, Billy. The cattle branders hang out in this shanty, and he is one of them, only he lives on the Big G Ranch and is deceiving your uncle and his men."

"Well, he ought to be caught in his work and punished for it, then."

"Oh, he'll get what is coming to him; don't make any mistake about that. Wild promised your uncle to help him run the cattle branders down, and he'll never stop until it is done. That's the way Wild does things, you know."

"Yes, I know."

The two were now within a hundred yards of the shanty, and just then a man came out and waved to them.

It was not Myers, but one of the five Jim had seen through the window the night before.

"Hello!" called out Dart. "What is up?"

"Come here!" was the retort. "You're from ther Big G Ranch, ain't yer?"

"Yes. What's the matter over there?"

"Somethin' has happened ter Bill Myers, who come here a little while ago. This blamed place must be haunted, fur a skeleton jest caught Bill right afore my very eyes an' took him up through ther roof!"

The spot Jim and the boy tenderfoot had halted at was near a thick clump of bushes.

They never thought that danger lurked behind the bushes, but such was the case.

"We don't want anything to do with a haunted shanty, not much!" called out Jim. "I reckon Myers will turn up, all right."

Just then a lariat settled over Jim's head and shoulders and before he could help himself he was pulled from the saddle.

Billy turned in a startled way and found a number of men in the bushes.

They were Myers, Aleck and the others of the gang.

Two revolvers were leveled at the boy, so he promptly gave in.

Jim was quickly disarmed and bound, and then Bill was treated in a like manner.

"It was mighty smart in your two galoots ter foller me, wasn't it?" said Myers, mockingly. "I don't s'pose you've got any idea of ever gittin' back to ther ranch, have yer? Kid, I hate you fur what you've done! I'm goin' ter give yer to ther ghosts of that shanty there! Your friends here will git ther same dose! Neither one of yer will ever leave ther shanty alive! Yer hear what I say! You've found who ther cattle branders are, but it won't do no good!"

The fact was that Bill Myers really blamed the boy tenderfoot for Young Wild West taking an interest in the hunting down of the branders, and as he had taken a strong dislike to him when he first came to the ranch, he was now quite bad enough to make away with the innocent boy.

Jim Dart was Young Wild West's partner, so that was enough to seal his death warrant, anyhow.

But as bad as he was, the foreman could not bring himself to murder the two in cold blood.

"Put 'em in ther cellar, boys," he said. "To-night we'll dispose of 'em."

So Jim and Billy were taken to the shanty, and in a little while they were prisoners in the cellar.

Their horses were turned loose to go where they saw fit, and then the four men set out to try their luck at branding cattle again, leaving the one man of the gang at the shanty to take care of the prisoners.

Bill Myers remained there for a while, and the more he thought over what he had done the more he became convinced that he had made an awful mistake.

"Knox," said he, turning to the man who had been left to guard the prisoners, "I'm mighty sorry we bothered with 'em now. We don't dare ter let 'em go, fur that would mean that ther jig was 'up! No! They've got ter die now; that's all there is ter it!"

Jim and Billy heard this, as the two villains were in the cellar, right close to them.

To Jim what the villain said meant hope, but to Billy it signified nothing but despair.

The little fellow was not used to falling into the hands of villainous gangs, and he surely thought that it was all up with him, unless something intervened very soon.

But he was very brave about it, and not a whimper came from him.

Perhaps it was Jim's coolness that kept him up, however.

"Well, I didn't know that yer wanted ter catch 'em till yer said so when yer seen 'em comin' this way, Bill," said the man called Knox, in answer to the remark of the foreman. "Murder is mighty bad business, an' I don't want none of it, fur my part."

"Well, I don't want any of it, either. But that boy has caused all this trouble; and the other fellow is one of Young Wild West's pards. Young Wild West means ter clean us up, I s'pose. He'll find out who we are afore long an' then we'll git it. If we expect ter stay here an' do business we've got ter kill off them what's after us, that's all."

"Well, I'll tell yer right now that I ain't goin' ter have nothin' ter do with ther killin' business. I'll jest git ready ter light out fur some other part of ther country, just as soon as I kin have a talk with Aleck an' ther rest. I'm putty sure that they'll want ter do ther same thing. Anyhow, ther blamed ghosts that come around here of nights will run us out, if Young Wild West don't."

It was evident that the man said this for the benefit of the two prisoners.

"I'm blamed sorry I ever said ter bother with these two galoots," said Myers, as he paced back and forth through the cellar. "We've got ourselves in a hole, an' that's all there is to it. There's only one way ter git out of it, an' that's ter finish 'em an' bury 'em where their friends will never find 'em!"

A cry of fear left the lips of Billy as these words sounded on his ears.

"Bill!" he cried, imploringly, "you wouldn't do anything as bad as that, would you? Let us go, and we'll never tell who it was that caught us until you've had a



chance to get away. Oh, Bill! I thought you was a nice man when I first come to live at uncle's ranch."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Bill, harshly. "So yer don't want ter die, eh? How about ther other galoot? I'll bet he don't want ter, either."

"I am not worrying a bit about that," spoke up Jim, quickly. "I knew pretty well what I was doing when I started on your trail. Young Wild West and Cheyenne Charlie will soon be along. Then you'll have to look out for yourself. As far as you killing us, you dare not do it, and you know it. You have made a mistake, and you know it—you admit it, in fact. Now, then, think of the best way to get out of it."

Bill swore at this, but it was evident that he was hit pretty hard.

"Come on upstairs, Knox, an' we'll talk it over," he said.

Knox knew that the prisoners were securely tied, so he followed the leader of the gang to the floor above.

The two sat down behind the curtain that was painted to imitate logs, and then Bill said:

"I don't know what ter do about this."

"S'pose we have a drink?" suggested Knox.

The two drank, and Bill seemed to feel better.

"Knox," said he, "you keep ther two here till I come back, which might not be till after dark. I'm goin' ter git what belongs ter me at ther ranch an' then draw some money ahead an' light out. I reckon it'll be ther best thing fur us all ter do now. If Young Wild West happens ter come along jest have the skeleton ready an' scare him away. I hope ther rest of ther boys comes back early. I don't think they should have gone out brandin' this mornin', but Aleck thinks he knows best."

Knox nodded, and then, after he took another drink from the bottle, Myers left the shanty and rode back to the ranch, only to be caught and made a prisoner, as the reader knows.

Knox went down the cellar and walked up to the prisoners.

"I reckon I'll let you two galoots go putty soon," he said. "I've jest made up my mind that I kin do better by skippin' out alone. This goin' in a gang won't work very well."

"Let us go right away, then," said Billy.

"Wait till Bill gits out of sight," was the retort.

Five minutes later he had gathered up what he desired to take with him, and then Knox liberated the prisoners, after first gaining their promise not to interfere with him.

## CHAPTER XV.

### HOP DOES SOME SCOUTING.

Wild and Charlie had scarcely gone when Hop hastily saddled his broncho.

Then he rode away, not knowing just what he was going to do, or what might happen.

The Chinaman took a slightly different course to that from which Wild and Charlie had gone, he thinking that if he came up from another direction he might be more apt to prove of some assistance.

When he had covered about ten miles of the distance he suddenly saw a horseman approaching.

It was the cattle brander called Knox.

"Hello, Heathen!" called out the villain, who had left the log shanty less than half an hour before, after liberating Jim and the boy tenderfoot. "Where are you bound for?"

"Me takee lilllee lide for um health, so be; where you go, Misler Melican Man?"

"I'm goin' to town."

"You likee havee lilllee smokee?" Hop asked, offering him a cigar, of which he had several in his pockets.

"Don't mind if I do. Will you have a little bugjuice?"

Hop could not have been better pleased. He took a good pull at the bottle, and then pulled out his big, yellow silk handkerchief to wipe it off before handing it back.

But it so happened that he had a bottle about the same size as that one in his pocket, and when he handed it back it was empty.

The one that was nearly full went into his pocket, under cover of the handkerchief.

Knox did not care to drink just then.

If he had he would not have done so, anyhow—not from that bottle.

He dropped it in his pocket without knowing the difference and then he coolly lighted the cigar Hop had given him.

"I hope we'll meet ag'in some time, Heathen! I ain't got long ter stay around these here diggin's."

"Goodby, Misler Melican Man," answered Hop, and then he started along the trail the man had been following when he met him.

By some chance he missed the shanty altogether and kept going right on.

He would not have done this if there had not been a patch of timber right between him and the spot where it was located.

Hop did not watch the trail very closely, and the first thing he knew he was on a wide trail that looked as though several had ridden back and forth over it many times.

Things were working queerly just now, but Hop did not know it.

It happened that the four cattle branders had made up their minds to come back to the shanty.

They had lost their branding irons, so they could do no business that morning.

After riding around for a while to make it appear that they were looking for their cattle, they turned and made their way toward the shanty.

Aleck knew the Celestial the moment he laid eyes on him, and Hop, of course, knew him.

"Velly nicee mornin', so be," said Hop, bowing to the leader of the four. "You likee playee lilllee dlaw pokee?"

"Not much, you heathen galoot!" was the retort. "What are yer doin' here, anyhow?"

"Me comee outee to look for um ghosts, so be," was the reply.

"Oh! Have yer found any?"

"Me no findee um shanty, so be."

"Well, come on with us; we'll take you right to it."

Hop, thinking that Wild and Charlie were surely there, signified his willingness to go, and he turned his horse and rode along with the cattle branders.



Pretty soon the shanty came in sight, and when Hop saw that there was no sign of our hero and Charlie there he began to think that they must have been there and gone. And this was the case, too.

The fact was there was no one in the shanty now.

Jim and Billy had found their horses after a short search, and then they set out for the ranch.

And Wild and Charlie, meeting them and hearing their story, decided to wait until night to come to the shanty and get the four men.

So when Hop got to the shanty he was really in the power of Aleck and the rest, and with no chance to receive any immediate help from any one.

"Come right in, an' we'll treat yer ter some tanglefoot," said Aleck, as Hop dismounted.

He did not wait for him to accept or refuse, but pulled him right inside.

The four villains, seeing nothing of Knox, thought that he was probably in the cellar with the two prisoners.

Hop sat down. Then Aleck brought out a bottle of whisky and five tin cups.

Each of the men took a drink from the bottle, using the tin cups.

"Who tleat lat timee?" Hop asked, smiling blandly at the villains.

"I did," replied Aleck. "It's your turn now."

"Allee light."

Hop pulled all the cups over to him and then picked up the bottle.

Then his other hand went into one of the mysterious pockets he had on the inside of the loose-fitting coat he wore.

"Me gottee uncle in China whattée velly muchee smartee," he said, as he held up the bottle and looked through it.

It was only natural that the eyes of the four men should follow him, and during that short period of time he emptied the contents of a little vial of powder into the four cups.

Some got a little more than others, but none of the four missed receiving enough to suit the Chinaman.

The powder was a powerful drug.

Hop always carried such things and, wishing to join the rest and find out whether or not Jim and the boy had been found, he meant to drug the villains in a hurry.

He knew very well that the next thing on the carpet would be that he would have his money taken from him.

Then what would happen he could not tell.

But he was going to stop all chances of anything happening to him now.

He poured out the whisky and had the satisfaction of seeing the powder dissolve the minute the liquid struck it.

He fixed his own cup last, and then, raising it to his lips, he exclaimed:

"Here um velly goodee luckee, so be!"

They all drank, draining their cups. Hop began singing a Chinese song now.

But the drug was quick in action, and the first thing he knew the four villains were lying on the floor about him, sound asleep.

"Me allee samee lightee outee now, so be," he muttered, and out he walked.

Mounting his broncho, he rode away at a gallop, just as though he feared that the drugged men might awaken.

Hop did not cover the ground so very fast, for after he got a mile away from the shanty he felt that it was not necessary.

He was satisfied with the result of his trip, providing nothing had happened to Jim and the boy.

At length he rode up to the house and, seeing them all on the porch, where they had gathered after finishing the noonday meal, Hop took off his hat and yelled:

"Hip hi! Hoolay! Me allee samee Melican man!"

## CHAPTER XVI.

### CONCLUSION.

As might be supposed, Wild and Charlie were not surprised when they met Jim and the boy tenderfoot coming from the direction of the so-called haunted shanty.

But when they listened to what they had to tell then they were not only surprised, but amazed.

"Ther murderin' galoot!" exclaimed the scout. "Ain't it good that we got him, Wild?"

"Yes, Charlie; things could not have turned out any better than when you branded his coat for him."

"You have got Bill Myers, you say?" Dart asked. "Do you mean that you have made him a prisoner?"

"Yes, Jim," our hero replied. "We nailed him almost as soon as he came back to the ranch."

Then he was told all that had taken place.

This was all very interesting to Jim, and so it was to Billy Dover.

They all rode back to the ranch, with the understanding that they were to go to the shanty after dark and clean out the "ghosts," as well as the cattle branders.

"Can I go with you?" Billy asked.

"Yes, why not?" was the reply.

"Good! I want to see the fun."

The boy clapped his hands with delight.

"Well, if that skeleton shows up to-night you'll see me knock it into a cocked hat. Then I'll rip down that curtain they've got there in a jiffy, and the first face I see I am going to hit good and hard with my fist!"

The boy laughed.

"Won't that be breaking up a ghost scheme, though!" he exclaimed.

When they got to the ranch they were in time for dinner, and the girls were delighted to see that Jim and Billy were with Wild and Charlie.

Our hero took Jim to see the prisoner, who was confined in an outside building and under the charge of Sam Pratt, the cowboy.

"There he is!" said Pratt, pointing to the villain, who sat on the floor, his hands tied behind him. "Yer wouldn't never think that he'd ever been a boss over me, would yer? Mr. Graham has promoted me ter be foreman now; but, somehow, I don't care much about it. I don't believe in drivin' men, an' I don't know how I'll make out if I'm easy with 'em."

"You will make out all right," said Jim.



Bill Myers would have nothing to say, so after he was sure that he was hard and fast our hero led the way back to the house.

They all had dinner, and, as has been stated, when they had been on the porch a few minutes Hop rode up.

The story of the Chinaman was a surprising one, too, and they all agreed that it was not so bad that he went out, after all.

Along toward nightfall the ranchman despatched one of his cowboys to the settlement for the marshal.

"Tell him that there will be about four more to take with him when he goes back," Wild said to the cowboy.

The messenger rode off, and then, after they had eaten supper, our friends got ready to pay the visit to the log shanty.

They arranged it so that it would be dark, just before the moon arose, when they got there.

The girls did not seem to want to take in the trip, so Wild and his two partners and the ranchman and Billy Dover were the only ones to strike out.

But after they left Hop set out after them, as was generally his custom.

Meanwhile let us see what was taking place in the shanty about this time.

Hop had spoken truly when he said it would be dark before the four villains awoke.

Aleck was the first one to awaken, and when he found his companions lying on the floor around him he knew not what to make of it.

But it soon dawned upon him and, staggering to his feet, he went to the table.

"Ther cunnin' Chineese drugged us, I reckon," he said. "Well, this is too bad! I wonder where Knox is?"

He got a drink of water and then, feeling better, he quickly aroused his companions.

It took about fifteen minutes to get them thoroughly awake, and by that time it was dark for fair.

It was just then that the clatter of hoofs sounded near at hand, then the voice of Young Wild West rang out, exclaiming:

"Fire a few shots to scare away the ghosts before we get too close, boys! Now! Let her go!"

Then four or five shots rang out. Aleck grasped the situation just as our hero wanted him to.

"Git out ther pot an' ther alcohol!" he exclaimed. "Up with ther skeleton, boys! We'll soon show 'em that ther ghost ain't afraid of pistol shots. Hurry, now!"

The villains hastened to obey, and in a very short time they had the skeleton and pot in place.

The pot simply contained sand, and when a quantity of alcohol was poured on this and lighted it would burn with a ghostly glare, and last quite a length of time.

The men got behind the curtain as soon as the pot was lighted, and then Aleck picked up the big horn and began to groan furiously.

Just then Young Wild West and Cheyenne Charlie stepped inside.

The rest were gathered at the door, from which they could see all that took place.

The first thing our hero did was to kick the suspended skeleton to the floor.

"I reckon we'll have to find out something about this,

Charlie," said Wild, as he made a leap for the end of the cabin.

Finding a curtain there, he quickly pulled it apart and a man was disclosed.

Wild's fist shot out and caught him on the nose.

It was the villain called Tom who received the blow and, with a cry of fear and pain, he went to the floor.

"Come in and help gather them in, boys?" shouted our hero.

In came the rest, and before the four men could get the trap door opened they were caught.

Finding lanterns in the place, they lighted them, and then they were able to see what had been going on.

Aleck looked at Jim and Billy in astonishment.

"How did you fellers git loose?" he asked.

"Oh, Knox decided to let us go, and he went, too," Jim answered, coolly. "He was the only wise one in the bunch, it seems."

"He quit, did he?"

"Yes; that's right. He didn't believe in murder, and since that was what made him quit, I reckon Young Wild West won't go look for him."

"I won't, Jim," spoke up our hero. "But, come on! Let's get the galoots back to the ranch. The marshal and his men will be waiting for them."

The horses belonging to the cattle branders were found in an old shed near the shanty, and when the four had been tied upon them they all set out.

It was just then that a loud explosion sounded and the shanty burst into flames.

"Hip hi!" cried a voice, and then Hop was seen galloping toward them. "Me allee samee blowee uppee um shanty! Hip hi! Hoolay! Me allee samee bully boy with um glasse eye!"

Wild decided to let the old building burn.

They watched it for a while and then continued their way to the ranch.

The marshal was there with half a dozen deputies, and soon all the prisoners were turned over to him.

Right here we may as well state that they all confessed to what they were accused of and received their just deserts.

Our friends remained a couple of days at the Big G Ranch, and when they took their departure Billy Dover burst into tears.

"I can't help crying to see you go away, Young Wild West," he declared. "But you can bet that I'll not forget what you have told me, and I am going to try pretty hard to be like you when I get as big as you are!"

"Good for you, Billy!" was the dashing young dead-shot's reply.

#### THE END.

Read "YOUNG WILD WEST'S FOUR FOES; or, THE SECRET BAND OF COLD CAMP," which will be the next number (296) of "Wild West Weekly."

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## SOME GOOD ARTICLES.

In Germany, a boy ten years old was sent by his father to pay a debt of \$25. On the way to the house of the creditor the boy stopped at a grocery and bought a stick of gum. He had half a mile farther to go, and upon reaching the house discovered that he had lost the money. The lad's father is now suing the grocer for the amount, claiming that the stick of gum made the boy careless, and that if it hadn't been sold to him he wouldn't have lost the \$25. It looks as if it would take a lot of law to decide that case.

The Irish terrier which exhibited its tricks recently at the Westminster police court is by no means the first animal which has relieved the tedium of an English court of law by its antics. In a Manchester police court a baboon which appeared in the dock with its owner, on a charge of breaking into a fowl house, showed its contempt for the court by stealing and chewing up pens under the very nose of the magistrate. At a London court 109 frogs were produced in evidence; in another case a porcupine was exhibited on the witness table of a county court to show whether or not it was worth the money claimed for it; while among other animals which have made similar unconventional appearances in recent years have been cats, donkeys (not, however, allowed within the precincts of the court), and a baby lion.

It was at an informal session, after one of the regular meetings of a religious convention, that the New Hampshire minister told some of his best stories. "There is one man in our church," he said, "who is as good as gold, but so long-winded that he tires everybody out. At one time it was suggested by one of the deacons that in order to avoid the extreme length of this good man's remarks at prayer meeting, we might make a five-minute limit. This I inaugurated at the next meeting, and it was cheering to us all to see that, when the long-winded man rose to speak he held his open watch in his left hand. When the limit was all but reached he said: 'Finding, my dear friends, that I have only a few seconds left in which to speak, and having much to say, I will throw the rest of my remarks into the form of a prayer.'"

The present road system of France was started by Napoleon I. No new roads of importance have been opened in some years, but the work of the engineers in the Department of Public Works of France is confined to keeping the roads in a state of high efficiency. France, to its remote and inaccessible sections, is so traversed with excellent roadways that there is now no necessity of adding any more lines of communication. The highways are the chief competitors of the railroads. The far-reaching and splendidly maintained road system has distinctly favored the small landed proprietors, and in their prosperity, and their ensuing distribution of wealth, lies

the key to the secret of the wonderful financial vitality and solid prosperity of the French nation. The road system of France has been of far greater value to the country as the means of raising the value of lands and of putting the small peasant proprietors in easy communication with their markets than have the railways.

Collar buttons are made not only of various metals, but also, and in great numbers, of wood. Round sticks of wood are fed into machines, which turn the buttons and cut them off, automatically. Taken from the turning machines, the collar buttons thus made are placed, thousands of them at once, in a barrel-shaped receptacle containing japan varnish, in which they are rolled and tumbled until each is completely coated. To be dried, they are placed, thousands at a time, in a similar drying apparatus, in which they are rolled and tumbled again, to keep them from sticking together, until they are thoroughly dry, and then there are the finished buttons, which have never been touched by hand. Wooden collar buttons are sold to the trade by the great gross, but they are not counted out in such numbers, for even machine counting would take some time, and cost money; so the weight of a great gross being known, discovered by actual counting and weighing, they weigh out the buttons for packing, such and such a weight of them making a great gross. In this way they practically count out 1,728 buttons at a time, that number being, in the trade, the wooden collar button unit. These collar buttons of wood are sold to dealers in laundry supplies and to manufacturers of shirtwaists. Altogether, the number used for these purposes is enormous, amounting to many millions annually. Wooden collar buttons are one of the minor products of factories making a specialty of turned wood goods.

## GRINS AND CHUCKLES.

"Was the fishing good down at the lake?" "Good? Say! it was so bully that nobody had to lie about it!"

Tess—Well, there's one thing about May Stiles. She has the courage of her convictions. Jess—Indeed? How do you mean? Tess—She's convinced that she can wear a No. 4 shoe.

Tommy—Pop, was writing done on tablets of stone in the old days? Tommy's Pop—Yes, my son. Tommy—Gee! It must have taken a crowbar to break the news!

"They have discovered footprints, three feet long, in the sands of Oregon, supposed to belong to a lost race." It is impossible to conceive how a race that made footprints three feet long could get lost.

The boarder, who was a month behind with the landlady, was surprised at the size of the heap of mashed potatoes on the plate the girl had brought him. He was even more surprised when he found a folded paper in the center of the heap. But he didn't open it. He knew what it was. Carefully wiping it with his napkin, he put it in his vest pocket, and went ahead calmly with his dinner. You can't disconcert an experienced boarder.

"Fare!" The passenger gave no heed. "Fare, please!" Still was the passenger oblivious. "By the ejaculatory term, 'fare,'" said the conductor, "I imply no reference to the state of the weather, the complexion of the admirable blonde you observe in the contiguous seat, nor even to the quality of service vouchsafed by this philanthropic corporation. I merely allude, in a manner perhaps lacking in delicacy, but not in conciseness, to the monetary obligation set up by your presence in this car, and suggest that, without contempering your celerity with enunciation, you liquidate." At this point the passenger emerged from his trance.



# THE IRONWOOD CLUB

By PAUL BRADDON.

"Murdered by tramps," were the words that greeted my ears as I trudged along the forest road in one of the northern counties of Michigan, under the hot sunshine of a June day.

An old man had been murdered in his cabin for money—a lone old fellow, who lived a hermit life, and great excitement prevailed in the neighborhood. I had been sent to the scene of the murder by a woman who was interested in the case, and I went to ferret the assassin out and see him imprisoned for his crime.

A dozen men, rough frontiersmen, were gathered about the rude log-cabin when I approached, with my bundle on my shoulder, and looked upon the scene.

"Eh? Who's this?"

Sharp, suspicious glances were cast over me. I resembled a tramp very much, and those men were just at present in an ugly mood. I did not fear them, however. I had carried my life in my hand on too many occasions for that.

"What seems to be the trouble, gentlemen?" I questioned, in a pleasant voice, that served to disarm enmity and suspicion.

"Old Ramroyd hez been murdered," answered a giant settler. "Some ornary cuss hes gin Sam his quietus wi' a club. Ef we git our hands on him we'll fix him."

The man looked savage enough to keep his word.

I pushed my way inside the rude frontier cabin, and there my eyes met a sight that was sickening in the extreme.

An old gray-bearded, gray-haired man, clad almost in rags, lay prostrate near the center of the room, his head presenting a ghastly sight, having been beaten to a jelly with some blunt instrument, the floor and matted hair saturated with blood and brains.

The old eyes were open and glassy, filled with a nameless horror that it was terrible to contemplate.

It was indeed a cruel murder.

"Who did it?"

At length I put this question to the assembled men.

"That's the question, cap!" grunted a tall, gaunt man. "Ef we know'd 'twouldn't take us long to fix him so he wouldn't do no more jobs of the same kind. Most folks think 'twas a tramp, but I don't 'low nothin' of the kind."

"Them fellers has got 'nough ter ans'er for 'thout puttin' more on their shoulders than they're guilty of. Now, it don't look likely that a stranger—an' a tramp would be a stranger—would look into this hyer house fur money, does it?—nor to sich as him to hev it?"

The gaunt old fellow pointed at the last toward the ragged corpse.

I felt that there was much wisdom in the words of the settler.

"'Twan't no stranger as did this, you kin bet yer life on thet; but someone who know'd Sam Ramroyd had four hundred dollars hoarded up in this old shanty."

"He did have that amount, you think?"

"I expect so, stranger."

"Then your theory seems to be a sensible one."

I made a thorough examination of the room, and soon found the weapon that had been used in performing the awful work. It was an iron-wood club, about three feet in length, the full size of the sapling from which it had been cut, something like two inches in diameter. The small end had been whittled with a knife, making a neat handle.

Doubtless the club had been cut for the express purpose for

which it was used. There were too many tracks about the house to note any particular one.

After making some further inquiries, I left the cabin, taking the ironwood club with me.

"The man who cut this club is undoubtedly the murderer," I reasoned. "I must find who cut it and watch the fellow. This is a clew that I feel sure will lead to something."

I scanned the forest closely in the vicinity, but saw no ironwoods among the saplings. It was not here, then, that the bludgeon of death was cut.

I crossed the wagon-road that led past from the village of Morgan, six miles distant, and entered the woods beyond. I came upon a path that led into the denser forest. Instinctively I followed this path, believing that it must lead somewhere.

I had gone perhaps half a mile when I came to a sudden halt.

The body of a slender, newly cut sapling lay beside the path. I at once examined it to find that it was ironwood, and that the club I carried had been cut from the same. A brief comparison assured me of this beyond a doubt.

I now pursued my way, and in a little time came out in front of a log house, about which were many shavings.

Under a shed near was a shaving horse, and near it several bunches of shingles. Just as I came up an old man came to the door of the house. He greeted me with a gruff good-morning, and asked my business.

"I'm in the north woods looking for a job," I said, tossing my bundle to a log, club and all.

"Waal, you won't git none here," growled the old chap, rather surlily.

"Did you know old Sam Ramroyd was dead?" I questioned abruptly, my eyes fixed on the fellow's face keenly.

"Yes, I did. I was over this mornin'. 'Twas a beastly bad job, stranger. I warned old Sam lots o' times, but it didn't seem to do no good. Hev they got the murderer?"

"No. Have you seen any suspicious characters about here?"

"Not any. Nobody comes to see old Si Bunday 'cept he wants ter git a few shingles. Nelse, of course, comes up, but it's ter see Mandy, I reckon," and the old shingle weaver gave vent to a chuckle.

"Who is Nelse?"

"Nelse Faddock, him that was widder Eade's boy. A good-for-nothin' chap mostly, but I s'pose he likes Mandy, and the gal's took all of a heap fur him."

"Your daughter?"

"Yes, cap," with a trifle straightening of the lean old form. "Come over an' chat ef ye like. I am goin' ter work."

The old man was soon at his post shaving shingles. I moved over and sat down near. Seeing a hatchet, I picked it up and examined it with some curiosity. There was a peculiar shaped nick near the center. This interested me not a little.

Why?

Simply for the reason that I had noticed a peculiar crease on both ends of the ironwood club that showed a defect in the instrument doing the cutting.

Carelessly, while talking with Mr. Bunday, I placed the edge of the hatchet along the spot cut at the end of the ironwood stick. The fact was at once patent to my mind that this was the hatchet that had cut the murderous bludgeon.

"Hello, cap! Where'd you get that?"

The old shingle-weaver suddenly held out his hand for the hatchet.

"I found it right here in the shavings."

"Land, is that so? I missed the hatchet two days ago. Glad you've found it, cap, for I've needed it more'n twice what it's worth. I've rummaged them shavings over a dozen times. I don't see how it come to be there now."

It did seem strange.



"Has Mr. Faddock been here to-day?"

"This mornin'. He's gone to Morgan, and feelin' mighty good he was, too. I'm given to thinkin' the ornary cuss s'pects to git Mandy 'fore long, they both looked so awful cunnin' when I seed 'em together."

Soon after I left the vicinity of the shingle-weaver's cabin. I was assured that his hatchet had cut the ironwood club that been used to murder Ramroyd. Now to find the user of the hatchet.

Was it old Si Bunday?

I did not believe it was. It might be Nelse Faddock, and I resolved to learn more of the fellow. Morgan was his home, and I resolved to go there soon to look for him. Meantime I went back to the scene of the murder. I learned that an old watch and pocketbook were missing, as well as the old man's money, the latter having been taken from a hole under the floor.

The country sheriff was already on the ground, and several local detectives. All sorts of stories were afloat, the general theory being that some men from the lumber camps near had committed the deed, and the sheriff and his deputies, full of this idea, turned their investigation in that direction. I was convinced the local detectives were on the wrong track.

They examined the club which I had returned, but found little in this to excite notice. I was permitted to retain the weapon when I made known my business to the sheriff, and that night, long after dark, I set out on my return to the village of Morgan.

Early on the following day I called on my fair patron, in whose service I was now engaged.

Miss Betty Sanger was a spinster; one of those lively, energetic business women, who had thus far made her own way in the world, and at the present time was village dressmaker.

Old Ramroyd was an uncle, which accounts for Miss Sanger's interest in the case. She had often tried to influence him to lead a different life, all to no purpose. Now that he was foully murdered, she resolved to spend her whole means, if need be, in trapping the assassin.

"Such a queer thing has happened since you went away yesterday, Mr. Sharp," said Betty Sanger, after I had given my report. The little dressmaker was all animation, her cheeks flushed, her eyes dancing.

"It's the funniest thing in my experience, and if I didn't feel so sad over Uncle Sam's tragic death I should laugh."

"Well, Miss Sanger, will you let me know what it is that has such an amusing side?" I questioned.

"You see this?"

She turned and lifted a shimmer of glistening dress goods from a lounge near. She brought it to me and held it up for my inspection.

"It is very pretty; very rich goods."

"The best grosgrain silk north of Grand Rapids," said the petite dressmaker, "and it's for a bride. You'd at once say that a very wealthy young lady was on the point of matrimony."

"Certainly."

"Then you'd miss it by a long ways," returned Miss Sanger. "This cloth was brought me late yesterday by the queerest chap in the north woods—Nelse Faddock. We all supposed him as poor as a church mouse, and the bride for whom this elegant dress is intended is the poor shingle-weaver's daughter, Mandy Bunday. I never was so surprised in my life."

I began to prick up my ears.

"This young Faddock seems to have plenty of money."

"Never heard of his having any until yesterday, when he brought this silk dress to me to make up for Mandy. They were going to be married in good shape if they did live in the woods, he said."

"Miss Sanger," I said, rising and laying my hand on her shoulder, "there is good reason for this ignorant woodman's sudden wealth. He is the assassin of Sam Ramroyd."

"The infamous scoundrel! I'll not touch this cloth again—it was bought with blood!" and she flung the silken drapery from her with a vengeance.

"Be calm, Miss Sanger," I said. "You of course expect a visit ere long from this Nelse Faddock."

"Yes, he promised to come this morning with trimmings for the dress."

"Then he will undoubtedly put in an appearance before long. Will you aid me a little, Miss Sanger?"

"I am willing to do anything, of course, to bring a villain to justice," answered the dressmaker, in a calm tone that increased my admiration for her.

I laid my plan before the spinster in a few words, and she promised to carry out my instructions to the letter.

Even while we were talking the sound of steps was heard ascending the stairs, and Betty gave me a significant glance.

"I will step behind this curtain," said I, pointing to an apartment curtained from the main room. Betty nodded, and I had hardly time to slip into concealment, ere the door opened unceremoniously and the man of my thoughts entered the apartment of the dressmaker.

He handed Betty Sanger a bundle and said:

"Them's the best trimmin's I could find in Morgan, Miss Sanger. Don't spare no expense now, will you? I want Mandy to look stunnin'. It'll make the old man's eyes stick out when he sees that new dress; but I swow Mandy'll fill it to perfection."

"One moment, Mr. Faddock," said the little dressmaker, in her softest tones. "In making a dress of this kind, so valuable, I usually require a small sum of money in advance."

"Eh? Money. Waal, how much?"

Quickly he drew forth an old black wallet and opened it. A thick roll of bills met the dressmaker's eye.

"Nelse, where did you get Uncle Sam Ramroyd's pocket-book?"

Betty Sanger put the question suddenly and coolly. The man started, and glared up at her, and began refolding the wallet with nervous fingers.

"It's my book, miss," he grunted.

"No, it's Uncle Sam's. How come you with it, Nelse Faddock?"

There was a stern ring in the little dressmaker's voice, and the man before her recoiled.

"It's a lie! 'Tain't the old miser's book. I didn't kill him."

On the instant I glided from my concealment and presented a cocked revolver at the head of Nelse Faddock.

"Give the book to me."

He handed it over with a growl.

I had little difficulty in getting the handcuffs on the rascal. I was confident now that he was the murderer. Betty had acted her part well, and had really recognized her uncle's old black wallet.

After locking Faddock in jail, I made a thorough search of the room he occupied in an old house in Morgan, where the murdered man's watch, and other articles of less value were brought to light.

Mandy had seen her lover carry away the hatchet on the day previous to the murder, so that the chain of evidence was too strong to admit of a doubt as to the guilt of Nelse Faddock.

He made no confession, but the jury were convinced of his guilt, since he was unable to account for the money and watch, or explain away the other links in the chain. Faddock was sent to state prison for life, a sentence he is still serving. Betty Sanger is still a spinster and dressmaker.



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